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The night no one comes home.

THE NEW SCREEN SHOCKER BY JACK MARTIN
BASED ON A SCREENPLAY BY TOMMY LEE WALLACE
A JOHN CARPENTER/DEBRA HILL PRODUCTION

DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOUR KIDS ARE TONIGHT?

The streets are quiet. Dead quiet as the shadows lengthen and night falls. It's Halloween. Blood-chilling screams pierce the air. Grinning skulls and grotesque shapes lurk in the gathering darkness. It's Halloween. The streets are filling with small cloaked figures. They're just kids, right? The doorbell rings and your flesh creeps. But it's all in fun, isn't it?

No. This Halloween is different. It's the last one.

THE WITCHING HOUR

Dr. Challis sat up. There was a sound like nothing he'd ever heard before. A muffled groan. Then a shriek. Then a high, steady, inhuman wailing that went on and on. It was not of this world. It was a sound made in Hell.

And it came from Marge's room . . .

MOUSTAPHA AKKAD PRESENTS

HALLOWEEN III: SEASON OF THE WITCH

A JOHN CARPENTER/DEBRA HILL PRODUCTION

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WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY
TOMMY LEE WALLACE

HALLOWEEN III
SEASON OF THE WITCH

BY JACK MARTIN

BASED ON A SCREENPLAY
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HALLOWEEN III
SEASON OF THE WITCH

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TO

DENNIS ETCHISON

If a way to the better there be, it lies in taking a full look at the worst.

—Thomas Hardy

It was my intention to set down the story of what happened to myself and to a little group of my friends—and I soon discovered that what was happening to us was happening to everyone.

—Kenneth Patchen,
The Journal of Albion Moonlight

HALLOWEEN WILL COME, WILL COME,
WITCHCRAFT WILL BE SET AGOING,
DEMONS WILL BE AT FULL SPEED
RUNNING IN EVERY PASS,
AVOID THE ROAD CHILDREN,
CHILDREN.

—*Traditional*

HALLOWEEN III
SEASON OF THE WITCH

Prologue

Challis was dead.

"EIGHT MORE DAYS TO HALLOWEEN, HALLOWEEN, HALLOWEEN . . ."

Children's voices drifted into the room, thin and tinny, sinuating from the corridors into the bright light, bouncing off sterile walls and ringing like beaten silver over the bowed head of the man in the white lab coat.

Which, of course, did not move.

"EIGHT MORE DAYS TO HAL-LO-WEEN . . ."

The insistent refrain, chanted inanely to the tune of "London Bridge Is Falling Down," was for a few moments everywhere, even cutting into speakers which were set to carry only a steady drone of Muzak around the clock throughout the hospital and, it had seemed to Challis lately, the entire world.

But tonight he was feeling no pain.

". . . SIL-VER SHAMROCK!"

At last the advertising jingle wound down, followed immediately by a few bars of what sounded like Madison Avenue's idea of an Irish jig. Then that, too, faded and a syrupy sea of characterless middle-of-the-road orchestral pop music washed over everything once more. It was a thick, blue sound, like Bow bells muffled by fog, and it fell softly on the ears, demanding nothing but passive consumption. On a night like this even Challis might have found it soothing. It was the music of merciful oblivion.

Challis was slumped forward, his forehead distorted against the ersatz woodgrain of a table in the staff lounge. There was no one else in the room. In the distance a bell was ringing dully. There was the creak of a stainless steel cart wheeling through the halls, somewhere the squeak of rubber soles on polished floors followed closely by clipped, efficient voices as brittle and cold as window glass, and the thumping of doors opening and closing in another part of the building.

At this hour, just before the majority of the hospital staff changed shifts after dinner break, no one had found him yet.

Challis could not have planned it better if he had tried.

Above and in front of him hung an institutional TV set. Its sound was off, a badly adjusted picture rolling from top to bottom like an out-of-control microfilm scanner.

Nothing else moved.

Now, however, there was a new sound: an electrical buzzing. It came from the lighting fixtures, as if an insect were trapped within the panels of the ceiling. The buzzing continued for a few seconds. Then suddenly one of the neon tubes sizzled and flickered out, as though dark wings had settled over that part of the room.

Outside the windows there was a blinding flash.

Instantly the other lights shut down. The fluttering TV picture popped and shrank to a tiny point, a single glowing eye receding rapidly away down a tunnel, and gone.

The lounge was plunged into darkness.

Rain scattered against the windows, illuminated from behind by headlights in the night. Drops clung to the panes, suspended there and seemed to turn, each an individual lens reflecting cars that passed on the road, then quickly flowed together and ran down the glass in sheets as the landscape blurred.

The first crack of thunder hit. It shook the walls and the cold fluorescent tubes vibrated back to life. The squares of the low ceiling brightened in no particular sequence, flicking back on in random order until the overhead checkerboard was complete.

In the peculiar strobing, Challis's arm appeared to twitch on the tabletop. His head seemed to raise uncertainly an inch, two inches.

A running in the halls.

The door burst open.

A nurse stood there, hands on hips. She hesitated before coming in all the way. She was on the downhill side of middle age, resignedly overweight, and wore the perpetual expression of a woman who has seen enough of all the wrong things to last two lifetimes.

"Doctor? You all right?"

She paused, glanced back at the commotion in the hallway, and came to a decision. She took two more steps into the lounge.

"Is that you, Doctor Challis?" Her face relaxed a bit. "How did you like the fireworks? Another one of life's little tests—a power blackout, wouldn't you know. As if we didn't have plenty to worry about already. That old emergency generator kicked in, praise the Lord. But I don't know how much longer Mr. Garret can keep it . . . *Dan*? Are you all right?"

She pursed her lips and crossed the room.

"Poor man. Working too hard, same as always." She sighed wearily. "Well, it's that way for everybody these days, I reckon. Seems like the Last Times, doesn't it? You look like you're dead to the world."

She reached up and twisted the knob of the TV. The picture

steadied, but immediately broke up into a swirling vortex of snow. She slapped the side of the cabinet. The picture pulsed into temporary focus. It was the Seven O'Clock Report with Robert Mundy, the local plastoid TV newscaster.

She adjusted the volume.

". . . AND LATER, IN TONIGHT'S SPECIAL EYEBALL-TO-EYEBALL SEGMENT, TRINA WILL SHOW US HOW TO MAKE A BRIGHT AND BREEZY REPAST WITH A FLAIR BY DRESSING UP A CARD TABLE. AND WE'LL HAVE THE LATEST ON THAT UNUSUAL CASE OF VANDALISM OVER IN MERRY OLD ENGLAND. BUT FIRST, LET'S PAUSE FOR THIS IMPORTANT MESSAGE."

The nurse rested her spotted hand on the back of Challis's neck.

On TV, a grinning witch's face filled the screen. Gnarled skin glistened, a warty nose inches from the camera as the witch peered down into the room through a storm of salt-and-pepper static. The effect was grotesque.

"Those masks," said the nurse with distaste. "They've gone too far this year—too realistic." She shuddered. "Wish we could hurry up and get Halloween over with. Nasty holiday. Nothing but trouble for children—for all of us. It's un-Christian."

"EIGHT MORE DAYS TO HALLOWEEN . . ."

The picture destabilized again as a new round of lightning split the sky outside. The commercial broke up and began to roll vertically, but the chorus of taunting, pre-teen voices continued to nag from the cracked speaker.

"HAL-LO-WEEN, HAL-LO-WEEN . . ."

Again a blast of thunder shook the walls. This time some of the lights went out and stayed out, as the small hospital's emergency system struggled to maintain half-power.

In the wavering light, Challis moved. His neck swelled angrily beneath his white collar.

Startled, the nurse snatched her hand away.

"Don't they ever give up?" he roared.

"EIGHT MORE DAYS TO HAL-LO-WEEN . . ."

"Turn that damned thing off!"

The nurse regained her composure. "Yes, of—of course." She reached to lower the sound.

"I said *off!* Now! Will you do that little thing for me, Agnes?"

Quickly she touched the knob again and the image collapsed and faded from the screen.

"Thank you, Agnes. Thank you very much."

“It does get on one’s nerves, doesn’t it?” she said sympathetically. “Dan, it’s after seven. When you didn’t sign out, well, I was worried.”

“I know, I know.” Challis rubbed his face as though to brush away cobwebs. “Sorry, Agnes. Really. I must have dozed off.”

“Passed out from exhaustion is more like it.” She positioned herself behind him and began kneading his hunched shoulders through the coat.

He didn’t seem to notice. He shuttered his fingers over his eyes and let out a sour breath. “What else is new? Christ, this is getting to be a regular part of my rounds, isn’t it? Tell me the truth, Agnes. I can count on you. You always tell me the truth. Don’t you.”

“Well, all I know is that a person can’t keep working double shifts for as long as you have and not expect to pay the piper sooner or later.” Her voice took on a maternal quality, scolding and solicitous at the same time.

“Everything,” said Challis matter-of-factly, “has its price. I knew that. But it didn’t stop me, did it? No, not me.” His voice trailed off bitterly. He snorted to clear his throat.

With surprising tenderness the nurse said, “You know, sometimes the price isn’t worth paying. Ever think of that?”

“I did, Agnes. Truly I did. Thought about it night and day for six months. A lot longer than that, if you want me to be honest about it. More like since the first year Linda and I were married, how do you like that? Then, after a while, that was all I did. Think. I couldn’t even sleep.”

“And are things any better now?”

To that Challis said nothing.

From outside on the highway came a bleating of horns, followed by a siren. A streak of red light swept across the dripping panes.

“Well,” said Agnes finally, massaging her strong thumbs deep into his medulla. “I think it’s time for you to get on home. Nothing personal, now, but I do believe we can manage without you for a few hours.”

“Home?” said Challis bitterly. “What home? I know, I know. I made my bed. Now I have to lie in it. Isn’t that what you were about to say?”

“Well, as I believe Our Lord once told Pilate, ‘You said it, I didn’t.’ ”

“At least I have a bed. Even if it’s only a mattress on the floor.”

The nurse lowered her hands from his neck and wagged her head behind his back. “My, aren’t we feeling sorry for ourselves tonight?”

“If I don’t, who will?” he snapped.

He unbent and turned to her, his spine cracking like breadsticks.

"Hell, Aggie, you're the only one I can talk to. Crying in my beer again, am I? Well, why the hell not? I put it to you. Seriously, now." He tried a smile. It came out brave but crooked. "Agnes, tell me you've got a nice cold beer stashed somewhere with my name on it. You were just about to say that, weren't you? I can tell. My mouth feels like a bedpan."

The nurse's eyes twinkled in spite of her best efforts. "You get on out of here, Daniel Challis. Go on, now."

"Want to get drunk with me tonight, Agnes?"

"Thought this was the night you're supposed to see those beautiful kids of yours."

He made a fist and slammed it into his forehead. "Oh, Jesus. You're right." He sighed hoarsely. "That means I still have to pick up something for them. Another peace offering. You know, it never ends. I never spent this much money on them when I was living there."

"They don't want your money," she said reproachfully. "They want you."

"Spare me." He pulled back his sleeve and checked his watch.

"They want their daddy, don't you know that? That's all they want. They—"

He rose abruptly.

"It's not what they want or don't want that's at issue anymore." He unbuttoned his white coat and headed for the door. "Their mother's the middleman now. She's worse than that pimp of a lawyer. The two of them won't be satisfied till I've sold off my body parts to keep them comfortable. And you know what? Even then they won't be happy. They'll still think I'm hiding assets." He was in the hall. "See you in the morning, Agnes. You know where to reach me if there's an emergency."

"At the house, Dan?" she said hopefully. "I remember that number by heart. I'll bet Linda's going to be so glad to see you that—"

"At the apartment, Agnes, at the apartment. I don't *live* at the house anymore, Agnes. It's not my *house* anymore, Agnes. Do me a favor and try to get that straight."

"Why, it's still your house. If you want to live in it, I'm sure—"

"I'm sure, too." He cut her off. "I'm *sure,* understand? Anyway, use the pager. It's simpler."

She watched him go.

"Poor man," she whispered sadly. "Poor, foolish man. They're all the same. They never learn." The rain bled down the windows like tears, casting rippled shadows over her. "By the time they do, it's too

late.”

She let her eyes close and lifted her face to the dim ceiling in the empty room.

“He’s a good man, Jesus,” she said. “Lift the scales from his eyes that he may see, and put Thy Word in his heart that he may listen, and hear. Before it’s too late for him, too. Before it’s too late for all of us.

“This man matters. He can make a difference. I believe he can . . .”

THE NIGHT HE CAME HOME AGAIN

CHAPTER

1

The headlights stabbed the road like icepicks.

Challis left Main Street behind and cut across town to Chestnut. The rain had let up but his wipers continued to skitter across the windshield, doggedly trying to clear his field of vision. Now they began to drub the glass, the rubber blades tearing under the useless effort. He gave up and shut them off.

It was Sunday night and virtually every place of business in Sierra Mesa was locked up until morning. The only potential signs of life he encountered were a taco stand, an automated Terrible Herbst gas station, a Weenee Wigwam drive-thru and a self-serve laundromat within which sleepwalking shapes glided in slow-motion as if underwater among gaping washers and dryers, laboring through the night over vaguely disturbing mounds of dirty linen. As he drove past the steamed-up front, an elongated figure of impossible height seemed to emerge from the depths of the store, growing larger in a sickly green glow from behind the coin-fed machines.

Challis accelerated and left the area, his unease increasing as he made for Tenth Avenue and his last remaining hope.

Otherwise he would have to throw himself on the mercy of Linda and the kids empty-handed.

Kids, he thought. They don't forget—they're too young—and so they don't forgive. They're the only truly uncivilized beings left on earth, a race apart, a primitive tribe and a law unto themselves. Like Linda. She's allowed herself to regress to their level without bothering to reacquire any of their saving graces. Somewhere along the line she became a beautiful woman with a steel bar shoved up her ass all the way to her brain. She can't bend an inch; it might kill her. She could relax her sphincter muscles and let it go anytime she wants to. But she won't. It's her choice. And that's something I can't forgive her for.

Unlike Bella and Willie, who are growing all the time. Unless she succeeds in shoving a rod up their asses, too. With her help they'll grow straight, all right—they'll turn into petty fascists, all intolerance and kangaroo court judgments and inhumanly rigid verdicts. Like machines.

I've got to get over there, he thought, and let some real life blow

through that house right now, tonight, no matter what. If it's not already too late.

He peered ahead for the convenience market, his last chance. They never close, he thought, isn't that right? Raul's there night and day, every time I stop by. He'll have something. Something to get me off the hook so my kids won't think I'm the schmuck their mother tells them I am.

The sky cleared above the trees and the STOP 'N START MARKET sign materialized out of the mist.

Well, praise the Lord, he thought, easing up on the accelerator. I'm saved, after all. At least I hope I am.

As he pulled in next to the curb he saw Raul's back inside the glass, bent over the counter and a copy of Kustom Kars Magazine. Steam was rising from the electrified sign and the parking lot was black and shiny as a snail track. He set the parking brake, left the motor running and dashed in.

As he swung the door open, two cars screeched into the parking lot in the manner of drag racers and braked in tandem at the walkway, their chrome bumpers stopping inches from the glass. A Marshall Tucker tape reverberated from the interiors of both cars. Stereo, he thought. He started to step through.

Just then he heard footsteps from the far side of the lot.

From around the trees an uncommonly large person—male or female?—came walking in slow, oddly regular steps. But before the figure reached the throw of light from the storefront, one of the car doors opened and blocked his line of sight. Distracted, Challis let the heavy door to the store close behind him and turned to the brightly lighted interior.

He ignored the magazine racks and aisles of wine and deli food and headed straight for the sundries, hoping against hope that he would spot something for a nine-year-old girl or a seven-year-old boy, or both. That's right, he reminded himself, I have to bring something for each of them. Or I'll never hear the end of it. If there's only one present they'll tear it apart in front of my eyes and it won't do either of them any good. It would almost be better to come without anything.

He came to a display of Frisbees stacked like Day-Glow pie plates, plastic value-packs of remaindered comic books, hot water bottles, disposable diapers, infant formula, the latest in aluminum cookware from Hong Kong, and a half-row of the newest fad, something called Shuttle Shoes.

He opened one of the boxes.

They were roller skates with see-through wheels and pictures of the space ship *Columbia* embossed on the sides. The box promised that there was a built-in AM-FM radio receiver in each pair. Very futuristic. Not bad, he thought. Absurd, of course. But not that bad. They might like it.

What size? he wondered in a panic. Wait, maybe they come in three convenient sizes. They would both be medium, wouldn't they? Or no, Willie would be small and Bella would be medium. Or maybe they're marked according to age. He shuffled through the stock.

Then he saw the price.

Right, he thought. Shuttle Shoes would just have to wait for a more important occasion, like a birthday. Or a raise. If he was still alive by then.

What do you want for Christmas, Bella?

Shuttle Shoes, Daddy! Oh, please!

Shuttle Shoes? Why, of course, angel. I know right where to get some. If your mother hasn't bought them for you already.

He gritted his teeth and made his way to the checkout.

Raul was busy ringing up cigarettes, beef jerky and L'eggs pantyhose for a painted alabaster hooker. Behind her, two guys who looked like they operated heavy machinery by day were weighted down with a pair of Olde English 800 six-packs each. Challis shuffled his feet and took his place in line.

The lights of the store beat down on him with an almost palpable pressure. He pinched the bridge of his nose. The two in front of him were talking.

". . . So she says, 'Don't stop, lover boy, you're just like a goddamn machine!' "

The first one, whose moustache drooped so low over his thin-lipped mouth that Challis wondered how he managed to eat (through a straw?) nudged his partner and howled.

"Well all ri-i-ight!" said the partner, and broke up guffawing.

Just like a goddamn machine. That's it, thought Challis. That's what they want to be these days: as much like machines as they can possibly make themselves. For unfathomable reasons some people delight in pretending to be as machinelike as the law will allow. It's an old story. It goes back to goose-steppers and the whole military mystique. No, it goes back further than that. A lot further. People who act like machines, machines that imitate people. Cute. Real cute. The height of chic. It's growing all around us, the Fourth Reich, like smog and inflation. I wonder what it's really about?

Challis breathed deeply to clear his head. His eyes wandered.

There was a closed-circuit TV camera mounted in the corner above Raul. It panned the register area slowly, making a potential arrest record out of everyone and everything. Smile, thought Challis, you're on "Candid Camera." For a wild second he considered making a face for whoever was watching. The watchbird, he thought, is watching me watch it watch me, and so on, to infinity. Like mirrors. It made him dizzy. He forced his eyes elsewhere.

He heard a soft *ding* as the hooker, leaving, passed through an electric eye at the door. Jesus, he thought, the familiar sound of a bell ringing hollowly in his ears, I feel like I'm still on duty. It's all the same. I can't get out of the hospital; it's with me wherever I go; it's inside me. That's why there's never any peace.

Well, he tried to tell himself, it's a living, such as it is.

Yeah. What you get is a living. What you give is a life.

The door whispered shut and a draft of air disturbed strands of crêpe paper over his head. Orange and black. On one looping strand a cutout witch flew a broomstick toward a soft landing in a pyramid of Charmin bathroom tissue. He smiled tightly. The witch bore a strong resemblance, he could not help noticing, to Linda.

Halloween. It was coming—it was here—and nothing could stop it. As if those advertisers with all their money could let us forget. And this Halloween seemed so much more oppressive and commercial than ever before. Maybe it was always like that and he had never noticed.

Halloween, he thought, is a state of mind. It's always here. Only the true ugliness of their money-grubbing doesn't show through so blatantly the rest of the time.

The guys with the beer left. It was his turn. He stepped forward and scanned the counter. Nothing there but TV Guides, cigars, blister-packs of Bic disposable pens and Bic disposable lighters and Bic disposable razors, the usual. Nothing to interest a kid.

"Hey, Raul," said Challis. "How's it going?"

"Can't complain." The night man gazed past Challis as if he didn't recognize him. Or didn't care to. "What you need tonight?"

That, thought Challis, is a pretty tall order. Don't ask.

"My kids. It's their birthday," he lied. "I wanted to pick up a little something extra before I go home. What would you recommend?"

Raul waved his hand to indicate the displays. "Take your pick. It's all good stuff. Just what the doctor ordered."

Challis ignored the unintended irony. "See, the thing is, I thought maybe you'd have something, you know, special. Not a hell of a lot of places open tonight."

"We're it," said Raul. "What you see is what you get."

This could go on for hours, thought Challis. A sham conversation unencumbered by content. He's programmed. Like he doesn't even see me. Or maybe it's just that I'm like all the rest who come in here, the tired, the desperate, the walking mad. What does it matter who I am to somebody who works in a Stop 'N Start Market? And what does he matter to me? Or any person to any other, for that matter? You pay your money and you take your choice . The only difference is when you can establish some kind of human contact. And there's not enough of that to go around lately.

Challis surveyed the candy and kiddie novelties. Gum in the shape of miniature garbage pails and hamburgers and gold nuggets. The latest *Star Wars* trading cards, with a picture of a cute robot on the wrapper. A glass case full of Polaroid film and radios or cigarette lighters, he couldn't tell which, designed to resemble cans of beer and soda pop, a made-in-Taiwan copy of a Swiss army knife. Shit, he thought, this is all junk. Linda wouldn't let stuff like this in the house. Her picture-perfect house.

The night man lost interest and returned to his Kustom Kars Magazine.

Challis was feeling helpless, beaten. But before giving up, he made a last-ditch sweep of the displays on the off-chance that he had missed something the first time.

Then, from nowhere, he heard a man's voice.

"Thank you for joining us," Challis thought it said.

"What?"

Raul looked at him blankly.

"Did you say something?" asked Challis.

He noticed that Raul was fiddling with a small television set on the counter. It was angled toward the register, so even if it had been on all the time Challis wouldn't have noticed. He craned his neck.

It was Sierra Mesa's own star TV reporter doing another one of his local news breaks. Challis observed that the fellow looked like an underdone veal cutlet with curls.

"Sorry," said Challis. "I thought—"

". . . REPEATING TONIGHT'S TOP STORIES. WAR IN THE MIDDLE EAST, A NEW GOVERNMENT IN LATIN AMERICA, THE SECRET SERVICE DONS SCUBA GEAR AS THE PRESIDENT GOES WATER SKIING, AND BRITISH AUTHORITIES ARE STILL BAFFLED BY A MYSTERIOUS THEFT AT STONEHENGE. DETAILS AT ELEVEN."

"Did you make up your mind?" said the night man.

"I'm still looking," said Challis. Sorry for keeping you awake, he thought.

"Try the Shuttlers," said Raul.

"The Shuttlers?"

"New kind of roller skates. Shuttle Shoes. All the kids got 'em now. Bigger'n skateboards. You can't go wrong."

"Yeah. Well. Their mother already got them some. The other day."

Raul shrugged and eased up the volume, as the "NBC Big Event" came on. This time it was a TV movie, *Shelley Winters: The Early Years,* starring Melissa Gilbert.

Challis swept his eyes despondently over the shelves behind Raul's head. Rows of liquor bottles, dimly reflective as dusty eyes. As a matter of fact a bottle isn't such a bad idea, he thought. There's always an escape clause if all else fails, even on a night like this.

Nestled between two half-gallon decanters of blended Irish whiskey was another TV, a small black-and-white monitor. It was hooked up to the camera in the corner. Under the excessive store lights its picture was all but unreadable, but Challis made out a murky wide-angle of the empty aisles. There was the edge of the counter. Challis could not find himself on the screen. Camera must be pointed somewhere else, he thought.

Just now as he watched the tube there was a smear of movement at the back of the store.

Someone was at the door. For some reason the thought made him nervous. He halfway expected to see the same tall shape from the parking lot, now about to march up behind him and, perhaps, lay an accusing hand on his shoulder. Why?

I haven't done anything, honest. See? I'm just leaving. My name is Challis, Daniel Challis. I'm on my way home. My address? Why, uh, just give me a minute to think . . . Listen, whoever you are. As a doctor I advise you to leave me the hell alone!

The electric eye rang its blue tone again as a man and his child entered through the glass doors. Challis knew they were father and son; he could tell by the way the little boy was holding fast to two of the man's fingers. They were coming this way.

"Help you?" said Raul.

"Masks," said the man. "You know, the ones on TV. Do you carry them?"

"Who doesn't?" Raul reached under the counter and brought forth three colorful masks, one each of a witch, a skeleton and a jack-o'-lantern.

"Yeah!" said the little boy.

"I guess those are the ones," said the man with an easy smile.

"I want a punkin!"

“How much?”

“A bargain,” said Raul. “Two ninety-nine.”

“Is that right?” said the man with genuine surprise. “I expected eight, ten bucks. Look at that detail,” fingering the vivid puckers in the witch’s skin. “They sure didn’t have anything this good when I was a kid.”

“Don’t know how they do it,” said Raul. His eyes widened sincerely. “At that price I can’t keep ’em in the store. New shipment’s comin’ in tomorrow.”

“Some kind of promotion?” asked Challis, edging into the conversation.

“I guess,” said Raul. “Silver Shamrock Novelties. Jokes and stuff, Halloween toys.” He set out a container of rubber insects, bats, that sort of thing, all jumbled together and trembling realistically. “It ain’t junk. Solid quality. Must be ’cause they sell ’em in quantity.”

The shameless horror of the masks made Challis’s skin crawl. “Got any other kind?” he asked.

Raul cocked an eye at him contemptuously. “Smaller ones a buck-and-a-half,” he said to Challis, misunderstanding.

“Is he all right?” said Challis, staring past them.

The two men looked at him.

“Let me,” said Challis, moving between them. “I’m a doctor. Here, let’s get him up. Is he running a temperature, sick to his stomach, anything like that? There’s a lot of flu going around . . .”

The little boy was kneeling on the floor, retching. In front of him a pool of vomit glistened.

Raul leaned over the counter. The father dove to help his son.

“Oh God,” said the father, “I told him not two cheeseburgers!”

Challis went into action, his professional reflexes taking over. But before they could get to him the boy straightened up, grinning devilishly. Casually he plucked up the vomit and tossed it in the air. It was plastic. A perfect replica.

“Can I have it, Daddy? And I want some vampire bats for the party. Okay, Dad?”

The three men exhaled.

“Would have been a mess to clean up,” said Raul. “Really had you goin’ there, didn’t he? You want it?”

“Come on, Dad!”

The man considered, reaching for his wallet. “You do have a bag to carry it in, don’t you?” he asked.

They all laughed over that.

“Don’t forget the punkin!” said the boy.

“How about you?” Raul asked Challis.

“The small ones. Two of the small ones. You can throw in a couple of vampire bats while you’re at it. And a half-pint of Wild Turkey . . .”

Outside again, sitting in the car, Challis watched the father and son walk back across the lot, hand in hand. He felt an overwhelming pang of sadness.

The boy was no more than six or seven, about Willie’s age. Having Willie two weekends a month wasn’t enough. I have so many things to tell him, he thought. Only by the time it rolls around most of them have slipped my mind. Half the time when I call she won’t even let me talk to him. I wish he’d call me more often, thought Challis, a profound sense of melancholy blowing like a cold wind through his chest. I’ll bet he has a lot of things to tell me, too, things I’ve forgotten and things I’ve never heard before. I’ll slip him the hospital number again. She doesn’t have to know. He can call me from a pay phone, for God’s sake. Anytime.

Anytime you’re thinking about me, Willie. Thinking about your dad. If you ever do think about your dad. You do, don’t you, son? Sometimes? Sure you do. And I think of you, too, and Bella. All the time. And when I’m not I should be. I’m going to be thinking a lot more about you as the years hurtle by. I hope you know that.

If you don’t, then I guess it’s up to me to tell you.

He tromped on the clutch and shifted gears, noticing that the gas gauge was a quarter of a tank lower than when he’d started out. It was because he had left it running while he was in the store.

But that was all right. He had enough left to get him home. He would always have that much.

As he pulled away from the 24-hour market, he saw or imagined that he saw a tall, stiff figure walking deliberately out of the shadows and past the glass siding, away from or toward the entrance. He couldn’t be sure. On the other side of the glass, the store’s three video arcade games blipped on through the night, even though no one was playing them; the greenish glow from their cathode ray tubes sent an eerie spill of unreal light outside to tinge the edges of a gathering mist which was beginning to blow into the lot.

Whether or not there had ever actually been someone lurking there was moot. It might as easily have been a branch, a reflection, a moving shadow.

Shadows that moved? There was no such thing.

It’s the bogy man, thought Challis, feeling nothing in particular about the realization yet, and drove on.

CHAPTER

2

It was storming again by the time he reached the corner of the street where he had once lived.

Waves of rain broke directly against the windshield, so that he was unable to make out house numbers or even the configuration of the rest of the block. So much had changed in the last few months—trees trimmed back, at least two yards landscaped and a new sidewalk put in—that it was doubtful he would have recognized the house on the first pass, anyway.

He drove blind, steering between parked cars as if navigating a mined canal. Estimating his distance from the corner, he slowed and rubbed out a clear circle on the glass, straining to see through the downpour.

He spotted three lighted porches in a row. The one with the yellow insect-proof bulb would be his house. Her house. She had claimed she wanted the colored light, he remembered, for esthetic reasons. But he was sure she simply didn't want moths congregating outside the door, her door. She had little patience with natural things, things she could not control.

A gust of wind sprayed the car and the yard outside dissolved. The wind made the oak trees shake like giant fists and bent the shrubbery nearly flat until one bush broke loose and obscured the doorway.

But wait.

He rubbed the cold glass again and peered intently.

It was not a bush that was moving.

It was the shape of a man.

He thought, Probably her newest gentleman caller on his way in or out; a nice, warm, cozy dinner for two. Why not? Get out the candles and the wedding silverware; make a good impression no matter what the cost. No matter that I'm on my way here to see my children. It's only Dan who's about to drop by (we don't call him Daddy anymore) and he doesn't matter. He'll understand, and if he doesn't that's his tough luck. He thought, She's showing a lot of class, as usual.

He veered to the curb and cut his lights.

The shape was no longer there.

He leaned back into the headrest and did something he had not done for a very long time. He flipped open the glovebox, rummaged for a crumpled pack of cigarettes he'd left there as a reminder of the day he had quit, and fumbled a stale filter tip into his mouth. He pressed the dashboard lighter and straightened the cigarette and waited. But the paper was wet and it crumbled apart in his fingers.

The glovebox, he realized, was leaking again. One more thing he didn't have the money to fix. Angrily he threw down the remains of the pack.

He observed the front of the house and the yard for further sign of movement. There was none. Only the motion of leaves in the latticework of rain.

Had he seen a man there or not?

Welcome, he thought, to my nervous breakdown.

He took another pull from the bottle of Wild Turkey, opened the door, rolled out of the car and entered the sea of falling water.

He slogged across the grass and mounted the steps. He thumbed the bell and concentrated on his shoes, WELCOME, said the doormat. Automatically he wiped his feet. The mat was soaked; it made no difference.

A minute passed. Once he believed he heard feet bounding across the living room floor, but it was only the thumping of a branch against the side of the house.

He tried the doorknob. It was slippery but unlocked.

"Anybody home?"

For a second he wondered if he had stumbled into the wrong house.

Then he recognized a familiar piece of furniture, another, items they had acquired together over the years, the residue of their marriage and now all hers. The front room had been entirely rearranged. It now looked like a model living room from some fashion magazine, but somehow unfinished, off-center.

She couldn't wait, he thought, to have me out of here.

He caught a glimpse of himself in a hall mirror. His water-stained jacket, his puffy eyes, the unshaven whiskers on his face . . . He did not fit in with the decor.

I was a fool, he thought, to have ever deluded myself into believing I could.

He swung the door shut.

From the dining room, the sound of chairs scraping the floor.

"Daddy!"

"Daddy's here! Yea, Daddy!" That was Willie.

Above the running, the clink of a fork hitting a plate.

"Children, we leave our food at the table!" That one was Linda.

The kids came waving spoons.

"Whadja bring us?"

Their combined weight struck his legs and almost knocked him off his feet.

"Lemme see! Whadja bring us? Lemme see!"

"Hey, take it easy . . ." He hugged them to his sides but watched the archway to the dining room. He actually believed he could feel her coming. Negative ions, he thought. Or is it positive? Anyway, the wrong kind. A stormfront of negativity moving across her tidy universe, ready to repel any intruder.

Bella, who was taller, clamored to get her paper bag away from him while Willie scooted his hands up under his father's jacket to find the other bag.

Enter the wife.

Challis glanced with painful casualness over their heads at the dark woman who now stood on the far boundary of the carpet.

"Hi," said Challis. "Sorry. Bad timing."

She did not smile.

Her hair was vaguely restyled, still curled but now brushed more to one side. This new emphasis threw the asymmetry of her thin features even further out of balance. One of her eyes seemed unable to locate him.

"I'm used to it," she said. "Remember?"

She waited a beat, pretending not to notice his shoes. My move, he thought. He resisted an impulse to wipe his feet on the rug. He would not give her the satisfaction. He allowed himself to be distracted by the children.

"All right," he said, "all right."

He handed one of the bags to his daughter. Her face was drawn, longer than he remembered. He had not realized how fast she was growing.

"Here."

He gave the other to Willie. Little Willie-boy. He wanted to scoop the boy up in his arms but felt inhibited by Linda's glaring, which he could not ignore.

He and Linda, separated by the children, watched them tear into the bags.

Two masks, the smaller, dollar-fifty variety, dangled from four small hands. In the lamplight they looked crude and sloppily painted. Oh

jeez, he thought, as the masks drooped in unison to touch the floor. I knew it. I should have gotten the bigger ones.

"What's wrong? Don't you like them?"

Bella, she of the liquid eyes and perpetually quivering lip, looked at him in disbelief, as though he had just served them up Lassieburgers on a bun. She could not bring herself to speak.

"Mommy already got us masks," said Willie, always the diplomat.

Of course, thought Challis.

Bella's eyes darted past him, her attention refocused. "Yeah, Silver Shamrock. Look!"

His face fell as the children's expressions became animated. They scampered for the sofa.

Challis was left alone in the middle of the room.

His ex-wife moved closer to him as a brilliantly painted skullface emerged from behind the cushions. Seconds later Bella, a bilious green witch's head in place over her own, joined her brother.

"Silver Shamrock!" they shouted through the rubber mouth openings. Their voices were muffled wetly. He might not even have recognized them. "Silver Shamrock!"

They danced around the room, mimicking that ubiquitous TV spot.

Without looking at him Linda said, "Nice try."

Challis stooped to pick up his dollar-fifty masks and stuffed them under his coat. Thank you, he thought, for that. He faced her.

"So. How you been?"

She met his eyes but seemed to be viewing him from a great distance. Her expression was veiled and detached, noncommittal. She moistened her lips with that lizard tongue of hers and opened her mouth to speak.

Suddenly one of the children cranked up the TV volume. It had been on all this time, glowing silently in the corner. An announcer with a clipped, proper voice spoke from the screen. It was the Cable News Network. Challis and his ex-wife turned and observed the newscast disinterestedly over the heads of their children.

He noticed her profile as she stood next to him, shoulder to shoulder now but not touching, her arms folded, her chin high and proud. She was smaller than his memory of her, and thinner. Her bones poked sharply through her clothing. He knew instinctively that were he to touch her she would feel like no one he knew. The curves and surfaces his hands remembered were no longer there.

". . . LEAVING BRITISH AUTHORITIES STILL BAFFLED AND WITHOUT ANY SUBSTANTIAL CLUES NINE MONTHS AFTER THE

THEFT. THE BLUESTONE WAS ONE OF NINETEEN BELIEVED TO REPRESENT THE NINETEEN-YEAR CYCLE OF THE MOON. IT WEIGHS MORE THAN FIVE TONS, MAKING ITS DISAPPEARANCE A MYSTERY INDEED . . .”

What were they listening to? Some nonsense about a theft in England. Who cares? he thought. That’s thousands of miles away. Almost as far away as I am right now from Linda. We’re listening to it because it beats talking to each other.

Still clutching their garish, oversized masks, the children were poised impatiently in front of the set, ignoring their parents as if they had always been there and would continue standing that way, overseeing the household, forever. Till death do us part.

“. . . BUT THE FESTIVAL-GOERS SEEMED NONE THE WORSE FOR IT, AS HAPPY CELEBRANTS GATHERED TO WELCOME IN THE SEASON . . .”

A smattering of an Irish melody crept into the background, followed by an electronic beeping. This latter did not come from the TV.

Challis snapped to.

He slapped his belt, shutting off the paging device.

“Oh no,” he said.

“DEREK SMITH . . . AT STONEHENGE.”

“What?” said Linda.

“I’ve got to call in,” he explained, leaning toward her.

Linda drew in her chin and stepped away from him. “Drinking and doctoring. Great combination.”

He sighed and headed for the phone. Miraculously, it had not been moved.

“Turn that down!” she said to the children.

He dialed the hospital. While he waited for Agnes to come to the phone, the TV screen went black, then grew a rich orange eye in the center. The eye became a pumpkin, bobbing to that insufferable Silver Shamrock tune. Bella and Willie donned their masks and danced along. Curiously, the commercial music was a virtual continuation of the report on that celebration or whatever the hell it was in England. Nice segue, thought Challis. Synchronicity.

Agnes came on the line. She was out of breath. “It’s an emergency,” said the nurse, “though nobody’s sure yet what kind.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’d better come and see for yourself. He—I can’t describe it. I may be overreacting, but . . .”

“Don’t apologize.” He was perversely thankful to be called away on

whatever pretext.

The nurse was saying, ". . . But I don't think so. Dan, you should see this one."

"I'm not arguing."

"EIGHT MORE DAYS TO HALLOWEEN . . ."

Agnes wasn't ready to hang up, but now he couldn't make out what she was saying. Something about eyes. She was almost babbling, which was not like her. Not like her at all. He broke in.

"Vital signs?"

"Down and dirty, but holding on."

"Keep him holding on, Agnes."

"Dan, I really think . . ."

"I said I'll be there. Didn't I say that? Agnes, tonight I am definitely not resisting."

He put down the phone.

Linda had sidled up while he was talking. She was standing there, waiting smugly for him to say it.

The hell with her.

"I've got to go."

"That's a familiar line," she said, her lips barely moving.

He ignored her. "'Bye, kids."

They did not acknowledge him. They were in a trance, prancing to their morbid little sing-along.

"HAL-LO-WEEN, HAL-LO-WEEN . . ."

He zipped up his jacket and made his break.

Linda was right there.

"Dan, now listen to me. Saturday morning, ten-thirty. You're picking them up, right? No excuses this time?"

He lowered his head and yanked the door open.

"Linda—"

"It's been four weeks, nonstop."

Now it all comes pouring out, he thought, just when I have to leave. The instant my life threatens to impinge on her all-consuming self-interest, her color-coordinated plans . . .

"They're your kids too, damn it. I'm going out of my mind, Dan! I need some personal space!"

"Where did you learn that one? Come off it, Linda."

"You promised me!"

"What did I promise you? What? Can you cut the jargon and tell me specifically how I've let you down?" He didn't wait for an answer. He

turned to the rain and the wind outside.

Before he left he said, “All right. Saturday.” He practically spat the words.

“EIGHT MORE DAYS TO HAL-LO-WEEN, SIL-VER SHAM-ROCK!”

“Bastard,” he heard Linda say as she slammed the door.

I don’t know what I came home for, he thought. This time I really and truly don’t. I don’t know why I bothered.

Lightning lit up the sky. He closed his collar and buried himself in his jacket. Thunder rolled toward him along the street like the warning of an avalanche.

Work, he thought. The hospital, he thought. My job, he thought. That’s all I have to think about from now on. What else is there?

He would go back to another case.

So it begins again. The real thing. The evasions are over. I thought I could get away. But I couldn’t.

Happy Halloween, he told himself, gunning the motor and roaring away from the house, his house, the house he had built and would continue to maintain forever, undoubtedly even unto death and beyond the grave, if his ex-wife and the lawyers had their way. Trick or treat?

He knew the answer, and would never ask the question again.

A FIRE
IN THE NIGHT

CHAPTER

3

The rain became a spray of mist, fine needles from an invisible jet to gloss the windows and flatten perspective outside the car long before he reached the hospital.

Colors softened to monochrome, the mist silvered in the headlights, and unseen traffic swished past in unknown directions. He kicked on his high beams, but that only made the road a solid wall of whiteness which swallowed signs as well as the shapes of pedestrians waiting on streetcorners for rides where there were no bus stops.

He counted stoplights. By the time the lane ended at a wide driveway and the fuzzy words EMERGENCY ENTRANCE came up, burning cool and pink through his frosted windshield, his shoulders were locked and his neck stiff and sore from the effort. He felt as though he had been driving with his eyes closed, negotiating turns out of sheer instinct. It was only a few miles, but he could not remember how he got there.

The hint of other cars loomed throughout the lot, and two or three overcoated figures loitered near the ramp. He parked next to a water-beaded motorcycle and hurried for the glass doors.

From out of the corner of his eye a tall, gray figure came shambling up along the railing, but before it could speak to him Challis was inside.

He shook dampness from his collar and strode to the admissions desk.

Agnes was hunkered over the telephone, her mouth obscured by the receiver and the whites of her eyes showing too prominently. Her voice was low but urgent. The hallway was not yet back to full power, but the area was bright with starched uniforms moving in and out of the floor's nerve center. The head nurse caught sight of him and put the caller on hold.

Her eyes flashed. "His condition is stable, but Dr. Castle left early and I thought I should—"

"That's fine." Challis let her lead him. "Where is he?"

They went to an intersection in the hall. Two police officers with trimmed moustaches and indeterminate waistlines lingered near a gurney, notebooks in hand. A slim, stark man in a rain slicker

intercepted Challis.

"Listen," explained the man nervously. He interposed himself between the doctor and the policemen, eager for an ally. "He just walked up out of the rain! I swear to God that's all there was to it. I brought him here . . ."

A ragged, filthy man was stretched out on the gurney.

"I was just sittin' there in my station, mindin' my own business, when this dude comes outa nowhere and keels over outside the window. He never said nothin' to me. So I got out the truck right away and—"

Challis undipped his penlight. He lifted the ragged man's eyelid and observed the pupil dilating sluggishly under the beam. One of the policemen attempted to hand him a clipboard. Challis signed it and deflected questions. He bent over the patient and felt for a pulse.

"Got a room for him?"

"Thirteen," said Agnes, ready at his side.

He gave out rapid instructions, but Agnes had already ordered up an I.V. and antibiotics. There were still symptoms of shock to worry about.

The policemen withdrew to confer. The gas station attendant was waiting to be cut loose. His eyes were hard-boiled eggs. He looked as if he had just run in off the moors to announce that he had seen a monster and was tired of waiting for someone to reward him with a tall Scotch.

"Hey, can I leave now?"

"Don't see why not." Challis stopped and extended a hand to give the man final absolution. He forced a professional smile. "Thanks for helping out."

"Yeah, well, I always say, it might be me the next time. You never know what's sneakin' up on you."

A faint strain of music began playing somewhere. A tinny jingle. It set Challis's teeth on edge.

The attendant heard it, too. He must have, because at the sound his head jerked around, searching for the source, as if he were being called to meet his Maker about fifty years too soon.

What was he afraid of?

High above the benches in the waiting area, an orange spot was dancing on the TV screen. The orange spot grew into a pumpkin as the novelty commercial came on for the hundredth time. Challis ignored it. The associations made his stomach clench up.

The attendant's eyes widened. "That's what I heard! And that's—that's what—!" He backed off, sweating bullets.

It must be getting to everybody, thought Challis. *Eight more days to Halloween* . . . It's beginning to sound ominous; some kind of all-pervasive, subliminal advertising designed to drive us all out of our gourds. By the time it gets here we'll be begging to be set free.

"Doctor," said Agnes, "look!"

On the wheeled table, the ragged man's eyes popped open. His head struggled up, shaking with palsy. His cracked lips twitched.

Challis put his ear close. "Can you hear me?"

The man's swollen tongue smacked. "They're . . . they're . . ."

Challis smelled his foul breath. No hint of alcohol. His hair was matted and he had not shaved in days. He resembled a prophet gone mad from too long in the wilderness. There was a gash on his cheek but it had already been cleaned. Good old Agnes.

"Yes?" said Challis. "I'm here."

The ragged man's eyes bulged and focused over Challis's head, where a horrific green witch's mask and a luminous skull now danced with the pumpkin onscreen.

"They're . . . going to . . . kill us! *All of us!"*

The ragged man beat the air with a spastic hand. In his fist he held a crushed handful of molded latex. A brilliant orange, more intense than any color found in nature anywhere on earth. It was a pumpkin mask. Silver Shamrock.

"Nurse!" called Challis. "Get me five hundred milligrams of chlorpromazine. Go!"

As the patient was wheeled away, Challis caught sight of the fearful attendant. The man's eyes were fixed and unblinking. As he backed toward the emergency entrance, clinging to the wall, he continued to stare transfixed at the TV screen.

"Hey!" said Challis. "I want to talk to you!"

But the attendant broke for the doors and was gone. He was running away.

From what?

Agnes finished giving the injection and placed the ragged man's bony arm back on top of the sheet.

"That ought to hold him till morning."

"Great," said Challis unenthusiastically. "Who's next?"

"Nobody. Except for him, it's been a quiet night."

Challis nodded curtly. The ragged man's sunken chest moved under the sheet and the rattle of labored breathing filled the room. He was emaciated, starved and dehydrated, sunburnt like a wino, though his

teeth were good and his hair had been recently cut. This one was no derelict. But there would be time to sort all that out when the man was rested and coherent. So say we all, thought Challis.

"I could use a nap," he admitted.

"Twenty-two's empty."

The hallway was deserted, the polished floor scuffed where the man had been brought in. A duty nurse sat stiffly behind the desk, nestled between rows of metal-clad charts hanging from the wall. Certain of the ceiling lights remained dark from the power shortage, so that the corridor gleamed in places but then fell away into unexpected shadows, lending a tunneled, grotto-like character to the unevenly lighted passageway ahead.

Challis moved at a fast clip, pressing ahead to Room 22 before his energy gave out. The head nurse kept up with him.

"Pillows are in the cabinet."

"I know," he said.

"There's some milk and cookies in the fridge."

He turned to her kindly. "That I didn't know."

She lingered at the door.

"I think I should have married *you,* Agnes." He reached out and patted her bottom.

"Watch it, buster! I play for keeps."

"That's what they all say."

He left the light off and plumped up a pillow. As he sat on the bed, Agnes was still outlined in the doorway. He could not read her face.

"Do you want to talk, Agnes?"

She laced her fingers together and took a deep breath. "He was the most—most *frightened* man I've ever seen. And I've seen them all."

"What does the police report say?"

She stood with the doorknob at her back, the subaquatic quality of the lighting from the hallway outlining one side of her dark features.

"His name's Grimbridge. No visible signs of injury, except for that cut on his cheek. He could have gotten it when he fell."

"What about the guy in the raincoat?"

"Mr. Jones. He brought him in. Works at the Jiffy station over on Charter Way. Says our man Grimbridge came from nowhere and stood there in the rain, pounding on the glass to be let in, then collapsed. The way he told it, Jones was almost as scared as this Grimbridge. All the way here in the truck he says the man kept going on about Halloween, Halloween."

"I believe it. Did you take a gander at Jones's face when our favorite

commercial came on?”

“Missed that.”

“You’re lucky. He looked like he thought that pumpkin was going to climb right through the TV and eat him alive. This Grimbridge must have put the fear of God into him with his ranting. What happened to that mask, by the way?”

“Police took it.”

“I wonder what got Grimbridge so scared?”

Agnes edged away from the door as the rhythm of even footsteps sounded from down the hall, back by the elevators. “Kids,” she said without conviction. “An old man like that—must have been some kids in masks, early trick-or-treaters, beat him and robbed him and terrorized him half to death.”

Challis was unconvinced. He took off his shoes. “Early? This early? The night before, maybe two days. But eight days? It’s eight more days to—”

“I don’t need to be reminded.” She shivered. “Eight days too many. In heathen times they used to call it Allhallows Eve. It was when they believed the dead came out of their graves.”

“I’ll talk to him when he wakes up,” said Challis, lying down. “Comes the dawn, I’m sure the police will be here to finish their report. We’ll try to find out. After we run some tests and get him pumped back up with nutrients, maybe County General Psychiatric would like to have a look.”

“I don’t believe in that,” said Agnes. “Witch doctors. What a man needs is a lot of TLC. You can’t keep a right mind without a healthy body. That, and love in your heart, and the will to do the Lord’s bidding.”

“Why, Agnes, I do believe you’re trying to save me.”

“Isn’t anything can save your soul if you don’t want to save yourself, Daniel. As for him, those psychiatrists will fill his head full of doubt and shame and his body full of Thorazine, so he’ll never want to hear the Word. If we sent him over there—”

“Two sides of the same coin, Agnes. There are two noble professions in the world. We heal the body—at least we try to—and they heal the mind. They’re not batting a thousand, either. But they’re trying.”

“Well.” Agnes straightened righteously. “I’ll see if I can’t track down a relative, some family somewhere. Every man’s got to have people someplace.”

“You are so right, Agnes. It’s finding them that’s a real bitch sometimes. See you in a couple of hours.”

“You stay down as long as you want to. You need it. I’ll look in on

our friend Mr. Grimbridge again before I make my rounds. But you stay right where you are. I don't expect anything else to happen tonight."

"One never does, Agnes, one never does." The door was almost closed. "Hey, Agnes? Don't you ever sleep?"

"An old woman like me can count on plenty of that soon enough. No need to hurry things along."

"Take care of yourself."

"Don't you worry about me."

The door closed and he was in darkness.

The outdoor lights played tricks with the walls. Each time a car passed the curtains seemed to move. He let his eyes close in the hope of blotting it all out. A day in a life like any other, he thought. The oldest story in the world. The one where nothing fits together the way they told you it was supposed to way back when, if you eat your carrots and go to school and work hard and marry on the right side of the tracks. The only story since the beginning of time. But there's no use complaining about it. That's all there is, there ain't no more. Live it or live with it. Or check out and never wake up again.

And miss Agnes's sweet talk? Not on your life . . .

His eyelids met.

The dream began.

In it he was still here at the hospital, sleeping soundly in Room 22. The curtains were rippling lightly in the draft from an air duct. He groped for a blanket but there was none. He buried his hands under the pillow which smelled faintly of disinfectant. A high-pitched sound like a siren was determined to wake him. He was determined not to let it. He would not give up, but neither would the siren. It won. He sat bolt upright, groggy and enraged. He padded across the room, flung open the door. The siren was louder. It was inside the hospital. *Nurse!* he shouted. No one came. It must be the fire alarm, he thought. He proceeded down the hall to find it and shut it off. In the next corridor, a man in a gray suit was walking in the opposite direction. The siren was closer now. Yes, it was clear—it was coming from Room 13. The door was open. He dragged his feet toward it. Agnes! Agnes was slumped down against the wall, sitting on the floor. Her mouth was open and the warning siren, the scream, was coming from her throat. One of her hands was trembling against her chin, trying to close her mouth, and the other hand was pointing. To the bed. Grimbridge's bed. Challis touched her. The screaming stopped but her mouth remained open, gaping in terror. *He's dead!* she choked. Challis went to the bed. Grimbridge was there. His face was not right. Challis looked closer. The man's eyes were shut. No, they were open—but he

no longer had eyes. Dark, bloody sockets where his eyeballs had been before they were pushed back into his skull. And his nose, his mouth —it was as if someone had taken hold of his face with three fingers, two in the eyes and one under the nose, and attempted to pull it off like a mask. The features were distorted, the subcutaneous musculature separated from the bones of the head. Blood was all over, gouts of it, including smears where the killer had wiped his hands tidily before leaving, even as the nurse had arrived to witness the horror.

A man, she managed, her voice breaking, *a man just—*

"A man—a man just—!"

The man in the suit. Neat, immaculate. Not at all like his image of a killer. A professional, perhaps. An assassin. An executioner . . .

Challis ran after.

No one in sight. Around the corner, an orderly came wheeling supplies out of a storeroom. Ahead, around the next corner, the sound of the exit opening and closing.

Challis got there as the door sealed shut.

He forced his way out into the parking lot.

There. The man in the gray suit. He was going for his car. Neat, flawlessly dressed, walking in even, measured, unhurried steps toward —

"Hey! Hey, you! Stop that man!"

He ignored Challis, unlocked a late-model car, climbed in carefully so as not to wrinkle his clothing. The windshield was steamed up. Through a halo of fog Challis saw him lift a large object from the floorboard. A container. The man opened the container and began pouring liquid into the back seat, then the front seat, then over the dashboard, finally dousing himself.

A one-gallon can. DANGER, read the reflective lettering, GASOLINE.

The man put down the can and held up a small object from his coat pocket.

"Wait!" shouted Challis.

A yellow Bic lighter.

Without hesitation the man struck it.

For a split second the tiny flame lit the underside of the man's smooth, perfect face. His close-cropped head turned so that he was looking directly at Challis from the center of a corona of light. With no expression whatsoever.

There was a sound of thunder, and the interior of the car burst into flames.

Challis rocked back and shielded his face as the entire car exploded and an enormous mushroom cloud erupted into the night sky. A fireball rolled heavenward, orange at the center and then deep red and veined with black smoke, searing trees and lighting up the night with the terrible beauty of an unearthly glow.

Then there was only the sizzle of the car's interior as it bubbled and melted, the pinging of metal and other fragments falling back to the blacktop.

The darkness returned and mist became steam over the charred wreckage.

Challis felt sunburned, his hands and face raw from the conflagration.

It might have been a dream. But in his heart of hearts he knew it was not.

CHAPTER

4

It was as if his eyelids had been burned off.

He stood before the white-hot remains of the car and what had been in the car and could not look away.

Only later did he help Agnes from Room 13, force a sedative into her and send her home. But he could not order himself from the hospital. The fire department came, and the police again, but he could not leave it to them to clean away, though it was now officially their job. When dawn broke at last on that gray morning he was at the window of Grimbridge's room, seeing the circle singed into the lot outside as though his eyeballs were protected by only an X-rayed membrane which let in too much light for him to ignore.

He could not go home to his apartment, could not lie down, could not even sit and close his eyes for a few seconds, for the images were too intense. He knew that with time a kind of scar tissue would form to occlude the memory, but for now the pictures were etched into his brain; he was afraid that the patterns might imprint so deeply that he would never be rid of them.

He considered himself a rational man, trained as a detective of death in the face of the seemingly irrational, and this was his climate. What happened in the rest of the world might be chaotic, but here cause and effect were supposed to rule. The problem was that this time too much of the chaos had broken through. It would no longer be safe here till he could find out exactly what had happened and why. It was important for him, too, for other reasons which he could as yet only begin to comprehend. But it mattered. Somehow it mattered more than anything else.

When the attendants came to carry away Grimbridge's body, Challis was there.

The coroner finished his preliminary examination and closed his bag. He was a man with an uncannily smooth, unlined complexion, unmarked by his job. What was his secret? He was chatting amiably with the sheriff, who stood shifting his weight from foot to heavy foot, defiantly ill-at-ease and jangling with weaponry.

With the blood still on the curtains only inches in front of him, and with the uniforms and guns all around, Challis felt that his sanctuary

had been invaded, that some larger, uncontrollable and previously unknown force had established a beachhead in his life. It was like that day in college when he had first learned about quantum physics and the Heisenberg principle; for a long time after that the world and his place in it had not been the same.

There was the ratcheting of metal and the legs of a portable stretcher scissored open at his back. Grimbridge's violated corpse was wheeled away.

"Is this—?"

A woman's voice? It broke like a small child's but immediately strove to contain itself.

"Ma'am, I wouldn't just yet." That was the sheriff, clearing his throat and shifting again with the squeak of leather.

"No. Let's—let's get it over with."

Her voice was incredibly frightened—close to terror, in fact—and incredibly brave at the same time. Challis had to turn around.

She was slight and dark, protected by stylish clothes and hastily-applied makeup and even, Challis noted wonderingly, nail polish. Her hair was pinned back behind her ears, the dark curls tightening in the early-morning dampness and threatening to tumble loose at any moment. She held herself perfectly still.

The sheriff set his jaw and lifted the sheet. Challis saw his knuckles go white as he gripped the shroud.

Her eyes were enormous and black, opened wide enough to take it all in, the horror of it, at one glance.

"Yes," she said simply. "It's my father."

Something wild moved across her face, disrupting her features in a series of tics. She averted her face briefly, and then her face was calm again. Only the muscles of her mouth moved.

"Who did this?"

The sheriff did not answer.

The coroner sighed and returned to packing his tools.

Like him, Challis had been through it more times than he could count. But this time was different. This time he was unable to offer his personal reassurance that the deceased had not suffered needlessly, had received the best care that medical science could provide. He could not find the courage to say anything to her. He had failed. The system, his system, had failed. He was afraid for the hospital, for those in it, for himself. He could not live with the feeling. Anger welled up within him.

"Some crazy man," the sheriff explained, though that was no explanation at all. "Killed himself in the parking lot right after. Drugs,

probably. Miss Grimbridge—"

"Is that it? My father's dead because some drug freak was amusing himself?"

An embarrassed deputy handed her a cup of water.

"The whole thing," said the sheriff, lowering his eyes, "is under investigation."

"I'll bet! I'll just bet it is!" Water splashed over her fingers. Her nails dug into the paper cup, about to crush it.

The sheriff drew himself up defensively.

"Miss Grimbridge, you've had a hard night and you've come a long way. Nobody's sorrier than I am about what you've had to come here for. Why don't you get some rest? When you feel better, I'll have some questions for you. And maybe some more answers."

Even Challis was unconvinced.

The sheriff patted her shoulder gently, as though he thought her small bones might shatter under the impact.

That's great, thought Challis. With that and a dollar she can get a cup of coffee.

He could not bring himself to speak.

She shrugged off the sheriff's hand. Her shoulders continued to slump under a great weight when the hand was gone. At last her eyes settled on the doctor. They did not question and they did not accuse. They were cold as black marbles and without expectation.

Say something, thought Challis. Scream, throw things, point your finger in my face. Anything would be easier than indifference. Let me defend myself. Grant me that grace.

I'm a professional. My job is to save lives. We protect people here. We do not expose them to unnecessary risks. And we do our job well.

We did.

Until last night.

"All right, boys," said the sheriff, hitching up his belt. "Let's clear out."

Ellie Grimbridge's eyes swept once more around the room but did not tarry. There was nothing here of interest, nothing of any use to her now. It was the parting glance of someone who is about to move out of an empty apartment. Forever.

She left, and they all breathed again.

The stretcher was wheeled out, and one by one they followed.

All except Challis.

When the police were gone, he did the same things they had done.

He retraced their footsteps, noting the positions of the bed and table and every other object in the room, stopping always at the bloodstained curtains. There was no other evidence that the man in gray had entered this room. Fingerprints? Negative. Only those of the staff. And his own.

There were not even signs of a struggle.

The killer—the professional, the Kamikaze assassin, whoever he was—had been as neat as his suit, machinelike in efficiency.

Unlike some of us, thought Challis, who are only human.

He heard an electric floor polisher whirring in the corridor. Come in, he thought. Why not? Make everything clean again. Make it so that no one will ever guess what went on here.

But I will know. I will always know. The responsibility was mine—he was my patient—but I gave up and tried to sleep it off. I tried to let go of everything last night.

But it wouldn't go away.

He waited as sounds of the hospital's normal routine began again beyond the walls of the room. Bells chimed, breakfast carts rolled past the door, rubber soles screaked on clean tiles, a maintenance crew clanked and tapped to restore full power to the facility. Cars and an ambulance came and went, a force of trucks roared past on the road with air brakes wheezing through the intersection. Morning returned, inside and outside. And still he waited.

When he had memorized every detail of the room, when he had recorded every surface and angle, every object from corner to corner to satisfy himself that nothing, *nothing* was out of the ordinary—nothing except the blood—only then did he leave the room.

He did not know where to go next.

Think, he told himself, *think!*

There must be an answer. Somewhere. There must be . . .

He opened the door.

He passed offices, the staff lounge. The warm aroma of coffee was only slightly reassuring. Crisp uniforms and scrubbed faces hurried past with charts and trays and equipment; stethoscopes dangled from necks like awakening serpents. Wordlessly he acknowledged a nurse with lipstick on her teeth and moved on.

At the main desk the bloodshot eyes of phone lines blinked restlessly. A manila folder with a message clipped to it was waiting in his box.

Not yet, he told himself, and headed for his office.

But before he could get there, at the junction to the service elevator and the fire door, he spotted a young woman. She was not wearing a uniform. She was alone with herself in the corridor.

She was braced against the wall, her body all angles and her face buried in her hands. Her hair had come undone and black curls spilled through her fingers as she held her shaking head. She was partially concealed behind the water cooler, as if she had gone that far and could go no farther and so had taken refuge there.

It was Grimbridge's daughter.

As he approached he heard her sobbing. Her teeth were clenched but she could not hold the sound in.

He knew that she would not want anyone to see her like that.

He wanted to help her. But he did not know where to begin.

The third time he saw Ellie Grimbridge was at her father's funeral.

He was supposed to meet Linda at the bank to cosign their income tax refund check from last year. He phoned the house and told her he was on call but that he would meet her on his lunch break the following day. She breathed into the phone and accused him of forgetting the children's food allowance for the week. Then she informed him that her car was not running satisfactorily. He did not argue. When she had calmed down she announced that without four new tires she would not be able to drive the kids to school. He told her to put the tires on his credit card and promised to put the missing check in the mail that afternoon. He wrote out the check while they were talking. He told her that. Before he could say anything else, she hung up.

The service was at Dry Lawn Acres. It occurred to him to send flowers. There were plenty already there. It was a simple ceremony with no eulogy and only a few families but lots of young children in attendance. Ellie Grimbridge came alone. He saw her get out of her car and walk up the hill unassisted. She was not wearing black, but somehow that seemed all right.

From the other side of the plot, a distance of no more than twenty feet, her features were so faint they almost disappeared like carbon-paper tracings under the veil. Her tiny, perfect mouth did not move, not even to thank those few who pressed her hand with condolences. She could only nod to them.

No one wept, not even Ellie. He had the impression that there were no other close relatives in attendance. Once he caught her looking at him with those oversized eyes, but she made no attempt to speak.

I know what you're thinking, he thought. I don't know what I'm

doing here, either.

They walked back to their own cars and drove away without a word.

The day after the funeral he had bourbon for breakfast.

The bar was dank, the air stale, the glasses not yet washed and reracked from the night before. Challis had been there when the bar closed, and now he was opening it. Charlie the bartender never failed. He kept regular hours, too.

A Saturday morning cartoon show was in progress on the TV set above the mirror. Two-dimensional animals with powers no animal on earth has ever needed were battling it out in a nonviolent war, accompanied by the same kind of synthesized sound effects Challis had heard from the electronic arcade game in the corner the night before. Man against machine, he thought. That's the new battleground.

Onscreen, cutout characters indistinguishable one from another jerked across artificial landscapes as devoid of life as the inside of an autoclave. Chartreuse invaders attacking a dog wearing a space helmet, for instance; that sort of thing.

"That's great," said Challis into his drink.

"What is?" asked Charlie the bartender. He sauntered over, drying a glass.

"My kids are probably watching this right now."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. What kind of a warped idea of life are they going to get from shit like that?"

"Beats the news," said Charlie. "Wars, murders . . ."

"Does it, Charlie?"

Charlie propped his beer belly on the stainless steel sink and rewashed the glass. There was lipstick on the rim.

"Pour me another one."

"Help yourself."

"That's not real life."

"Right," said Charlie. "My niece's kid, he sees the Four O'clock News, the Six O'Clock News, the Ten O'Clock News, every kind of news there is. I'm waitin' for him to blow some kid away on the playground one of these days."

"Unh-uh," said Challis, shaking his head.

"I tell her not to let him watch all that crap, but you can't protect 'em. It's in the movies now, all over the TV—"

"No. I don't think so. Telling the truth isn't the same thing as advocacy."

"What?"

"Kids understand the difference."

"I'm not so sure about that."

"Well, I am. Did real life, wars, all that stuff we went through turn you and me into maniacs, Charlie?"

"Well . . ."

"I say *this* is what's dangerous. Animals in space, Big Bird, Scrubbing Bubbles fighting the Dirt Monster—nobody gets hurt no matter what."

"So?"

"We're afraid to let them grow up. At least that's the way it seems to me. What do you think's going to happen the first time somebody takes a swing, tries to mug 'em in the bathroom at Chuck E. Cheese's? Their Super Friends with Super Powers won't be enough. And they'll get their little asses kicked around the block. Or worse."

Challis ran out of breath. He saw his own face reflected in the bourbon. It was bent out of shape, almost unrecognizable.

"I think I see what you mean," said Charlie. He didn't, but that was all right, too.

Challis filtered another shot of bourbon through his teeth.

"Let 'em see what's really there. Otherwise they won't know until it's too late. They think the world is a game. It isn't. Or if it is, somebody's been keeping the rules a secret for a hell of a long time."

"Can't argue with you there, pardner," said Charlie.

I'd tell my Willie about it, the danger, thought Challis. If I ever got to see him. Who knows what his mother is filling his head with? Money that arrives in the mailbox every week no matter what, food that no one has to earn, presents that come king-sized whether you deserve them or not.

Linda's living in a dream world, he thought, the same as they are. How can I blame them for being spoiled? I can't. Not me.

He squinted up at the TV without hope. An animated leprechaun was skipping through clover, singing the virtues of sugar for breakfast that was sold in the shape of good-luck charms. Challis winced.

"Hey, Charlie. How about another channel?"

Nobody was watching it. There was nobody else in the place. Charlie shrugged and flipped the selector.

Channel 4. A network preview faded in.

A long-legged girl with good bones and a lingering tomboy

disposition was crossing a tree-lined street. It looked very much like Sierra Mesa; in fact it might have been filmed here, thought Challis. Except for the quick flash of a palm tree on the horizon, it could be the Midwest. Illinois, say. Bradbury country, if he remembered his high-school English. A repetitious but properly nerve-wracking piano melody tinkled on the soundtrack.

"HALLOWEEN!" intoned a hyperstimulated announcer. "THE SPECIAL FEATURE ON OUR VERY SPECIAL HALLOWEEN NIGHT HORRORTHON!"

The preview cut to another shot of the long-legged girl, now flanked by two of her friends, walking home from school in a typical middle-class neighborhood.

". . . Totally insane!" prattled the foxy-looking girl on the left. *"We have three new cheers to learn in the morning, the game in the afternoon, I get my hair done at five, and the dance is at eight. I'll be totally wiped out!"*

Damn totally straight, thought Challis, sipping slowly.

The girl on the right made a derisive comment. Dark, New York, sarcastic passing for witty. A real ballbreaker. Hmm, he thought. I know the type well. Reminds me a little bit of old Linda. I'll bet that's what she was like at that age. Always on hand with the right remark to shoot down anybody in sight.

Just then the long-legged girl stopped dead in her tracks.

Cut to her point of view.

A tall shape blocking the sidewalk ahead. Silent and evil-looking. Some kind of mask on his face.

The announcer's voice:

"STARTING AT TWELVE NOON WITH SUCH CLASSICS AS *THE CREEPING UNKNOWN, ENEMY FROM SPACE* AND *FIVE MILLION YEARS TO EARTH!* CLIMAXING WITH THAT BLOODCURDLING CLASSIC, *HALLOWEEN,* THE MOVIE GENE SHALIT SAYS STOOD HIS HAIR ON END! AND ALL BROUGHT TO YOU WITHOUT INTERRUPTION BY . . ."

"Charlie," groaned Challis.

The familiar tones of the commercial followed.

"TWO MORE DAYS TO HALLOWEEN, HALLOWEEN, HALLOWEEN . . ."

"Come on, Charlie!"

"Whatsamatter? Don't you have any holiday spirit?"

"No."

Charlie kept flipping till he found a football game. He nodded with

satisfaction, drew himself a beer, whipped off his apron and settled down to watch.

The door to the bar opened a sliver. Challis tried to ignore the glare from outside. After a minute he couldn't; it was blanking out the TV. He swiveled on his stool.

And saw who it was.

Standing there, sunlight coruscating through her hair and almost blacking in her features, was Ellie Grimbridge.

She let the door close. She came right over to him. She was considerably more relaxed than the last time he had seen her, and her eyes were stopped down to a more realistic size. She's had some sleep, thought Challis. I wonder who gave her the pills?

"Hi," she said.

"Hello."

"My name's Ellie Grimbridge."

"I know." He tipped his glass to her. "Dan Challis."

"I know." Challis felt a cool breeze touch his face as she sat next to him. She smelled good. Clean. He wasn't surprised. "One of the nurses told me where I could find you," she said.

"Ah. Probably Agnes." I shouldn't have had that last drink, he thought. I can't seem to keep her centered. She must be sitting awfully close. But I sure can smell her. Thank God for small favors. "I like Agnes," he said, feeling dizzy. He couldn't think of anything clever to say.

She looked down. I scared her off, he thought. Or my breath did. Now she's going to think even less of me than she did before, if she even thought of me at all. She must think I'm utterly useless.

But she came here.

Challis made a herculean effort to pull himself together.

"I'm sorry about your father. I thought about calling or sending flowers or something. But I figured you'd rather be left alone."

"You figured right." She took a deep breath. "Thanks for coming to the funeral."

Thanks for noticing, he thought. But how can you thank me? I'm the one who let—

"You do this every Saturday morning?"

"No," he said immediately. She was slipping in and out of a demure, businesslike tone and a more personal, friendly one. Working quickly through the levels. What does she want? Whatever it is, I owe her. I owe myself. Press it. Cut through all this to what's really going on.

"This," he said, "is a special occasion. I'm supposed to—" Why was

he hedging? “To go pick up my kids. In a little while. We’re going bowling. Then to the Fun Factory. One hundred and fifty video games in a relatively small room.”

It was the best he could do. Jesus Christ, he thought, she’s exquisite. Then: What am I thinking? That’s disgusting. She probably thinks you’re an old man—she’s going to start calling you *sir* any minute. Then: Relax, you poor son of a bitch. You haven’t been out in the real world for a while, have you?

Be serious. She’s got a problem and she wants your help. She didn’t come down here to say thanks; she could have done that with a card. As if she had anything to thank you for. And her problem is your problem, isn’t it? *Isn’t it?* One and the same.

How to begin?

“One more, Charlie.”

The bartender tore himself away from the football game. “Yo, boss.”

Challis said to her, “Get you one?”

“No, thanks.” There was something on her mind, all right. “Did—did my father say anything to you the night he died?”

Charlie poured the drink. Challis studied it.

He measured his words. “Yeah. He said, ‘Tell Ellie I love her.’ ”

He glanced over to see if she believed him. She clearly did not. But now her lips were trembling.

“You’re a bad liar,” she said softly. She rose shakily, holding herself together with visible effort. Challis was suddenly and overwhelmingly moved by her effort. “But thanks anyway.”

“Listen,” he said without pretense, as straight as he knew how. The bourbon helped. “I guess you have a right to know the truth.”

She can take it, he thought. Somehow he was absolutely sure of it.

“I hate to tell you this, but your old man was out of his mind. He was delirious. They found him wandering in the rain with a Halloween mask in his hand.”

That last remark brought the wildness to her eyes again. Instantly he regretted it. But before he could say anything more, she bit her lip and made up her mind.

“Can I show you something?” she asked.

SOMETHING STRANGE IN SANTA MIRA

CHAPTER 5

"Papa really loved this place. But business was getting bad . . . I suppose you shopped at the new mall like everybody else."

Ellie keyed the lock and shook back the door to her father's store.

Challis gave a last look to the street before entering. At the end of the block a tangle of bicycles blocked the cracked sidewalk and the voices of unseen children cried out from between sere oak trees. Though he knew it to be midday, he had the overriding impression that the sun was about to set.

He felt nebulously guilty, a trespasser in a special place that by rights belonged only to the neighborhood. It was an isolated area, apparently peopled exclusively by the very old and the very young, where trees planted before the town had a name continued steadfastly to shade their own against the onslaught of time and city planners.

On streets such as this one it always seemed to be turning late in the year.

Challis followed her inside.

"He was thinking about closing down. His last letter was all about it. That was three weeks ago. He wasn't out of his mind then."

"I believe you," said Challis.

He gave his eyes a chance to adjust.

It was what in his childhood would have been called a general store. Along one wall was a rack of aging sports equipment, including softball bats, volleyballs and tennis shoes. Next to that, a row of bicycle tires and limp inner tubes and handlebar reflectors that held him like flies' eyes as he passed. Tools, appliances, even clothes, everything catalogued and laid out in some arcane order.

And toys. Lots of toys.

Ellie trailed her fingers familiarly over the displays, picking up dust which she examined dispassionately before wiping her hands. She led him in a straight line to the antique register and an old-fashioned, leather-cornered ledger.

"The kids were keeping him going. They'd come in after school. He let them play with the stuff right in the aisles . . . like I used to do when I was little." A smile as fleeting as a summer's day played at the

corners of her mouth.

“Then, later, he never wanted me to come here. In case I found him not doing anything, just sitting there, doodling.”

She scanned a page of the ledger.

“Candy, gum, two bicycles, a basketball, a few baseballs, toys. It’s all here.” Her eyes sparked at him. “He kept pretty good records for a crazy man, Doctor.”

That got to him.

“I’m sorry about the comment,” he said.

Perhaps I should go. I’m not doing her any good. This is her world. I didn’t even know the man. What more can I possibly do to make what happened any easier?

“It’s all right,” she said, shifting her tone back to neutral. He marveled at her self-control. “I did want to show you something.”

Beyond a shaft of golden sunlight at the front door, a dog barked at the clacking of roller skates. Unhurried cars cut through the autumn air, ignoring the storefront as if it were not there. The air sharpened around him. It was made up of millions of fine particles as clearly defined now as bits of crushed glass held in suspension on the mixture of scents that was October.

Ellie set the ledger aside. She opened a small appointment book.

“ ‘October 18,’ ” she read. “ ’Merchants’ Council meeting.’ He was there, I checked. ‘October 19, football game.’ He was there, too. ‘October 20, pick up more masks.’ Probably referring to those.”

She pointed to a shelf of rubber pumpkins and witches and death’s-heads.

Challis nodded. “I know them. That’s the kind he had in his hand.”

“They’re very popular,” said Ellie coolly. “According to Papa’s ledger he couldn’t stock them fast enough. I did a little detective work. The town where they make them isn’t too far from here.”

“So what?”

“If he went to the factory to pick up his order—”

“Why wouldn’t he have it sent?”

“Too close to Halloween. Besides, any businessman will tell you that if you go to the factory direct, you’ll cut your overhead. If Papa went there, then maybe they know something I need to know.”

“Maybe.”

“Look,” she said defensively, “my father wasn’t crazy.”

“I know. I already told you I believe you.”

She accepted that and returned to the appointments. “ ‘October 21, dinner with Minnie.’ That was the day after.” She closed the book.

"Minnie Blankenship. He stood her up."

"You've been busy."

"It doesn't take Sherlock Holmes to figure this stuff out. My father ran into trouble somewhere between here and Santa Mira."

"Santa Mira?"

"Where they make those masks. Little place, not too many miles away."

The roller skates returned.

Wheels spun at the front door, and a boy of nine or ten stuck his head inside. He had dirt on his face and grass in his hair.

"Pop?"

"The store's closed," said Ellie.

"Uh, sorry. Is Mr. Grimbridge here?"

Ellie shut her eyes. "No," she said with great control, "he's not."

"Oh. Too bad. When's he comin' back?"

Ellie lowered her chin to conceal her face.

"Son, the store's closed," said Challis. "It's not—there's no one here now."

"Oh. Well, is it ever gonna be open again?"

"We'll see," said Challis kindly.

"Oh. Well, tell Mr. Grimbridge to hurry back, okay? We need him bad. It's almost Halloween!"

The boy nosed his skates, his Shuttlers, back to the sidewalk.

Ellie raised her head and rolled her eyes to clear them.

"I'm going," she said.

"Wait—"

"No! It's not too far to drive," she said reasonably. "Maybe they can tell me something. It's better than waiting for the sheriff to move."

Challis sighed.

Ellie searched for her keys. "Look. The sheriff can talk all he wants to about some berserko drug addict and I still won't buy it. I'm surprised you do," she added contemptuously.

"I didn't say I did."

"I'm not going back to L.A. until I talk to the people at that factory. And anybody in between, for that matter."

She was ready to leave. She would not be talked out of it.

She stopped at the door.

"Well?" she said.

It was probably useless.

What the hell, he thought. It matters. It matters to someone. It damn well should.

It matters to that little boy.

It matters to her.

Who else?

It's none of my business, of course . . .

The hell it isn't.

"Want some company?" he said.

The day was clear and sunny but the air was close inside the phone booth.

He slapped his change down. One quarter dropped at his feet among candy wrappers, an old TV Guide, an empty pack of Big Red chewing gum, a rotting, translucent balloon, a matchbook from the Rabbit-In-Red Lounge. He did not try to retrieve it.

He punched coins into the slot and dialed his— Linda's—number.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Linda? I'm sorry, but I'm not going to be able to—"

"Daddy? Is that you? Why aren't you here?"

"Bella? I have to talk to Mommy, honey. Is she—?"

"Just a minute."

He felt like a shit, hearing his daughter's voice drop. He bore down.

"Dan, where are you? You promised!"

"I know I promised. But I completely forgot. There's an all-day seminar, I can't get out of it, I should have remembered but—"

He listened to her breath steaming into the phone, then the torrent of words.

He fingered a coin, tapped out an inane melody on the glass. *London Bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down* . . .

Waiting for her to finish.

She never would.

Among the graffiti on the booth, someone of great prescience had written: *Roses are red/Violets are blue/I'm schizophrenic/And so am I.*

"Look, Linda, I can't get out of it. I'm really sorry. Uh, just a bunch of doctors talking about boring stuff . . . Linda, take it easy."

He took the cold six-pack from under his arm and worked one of the cans free.

"I'll call you Monday."

He snapped the metal ring back and popped it open.

“No, I can’t remember the name of the hotel.”

He poured beer down his throat. It tasted bitter but he knew it would make him feel better in a few minutes.

“I’ve got to go. ’Bye. *’Bye.*”

Ellie’s maroon Cutlass was waiting at the curb in front of the liquor store.

He had finished the can by the time she had the motor started. As they glided away into a clear, windswept afternoon, something called his attention to the window of an electronics store.

There.

Three, four, a half-dozen TV sets of various makes and sizes tuned to the same channel. And, on every one, an unholy triumvirate danced on and on to the same Irish jig.

“GLOWS IN THE DARK! ONLY TWO MORE DAYS! BUY ONE, GET IN ON THE FUN!”

And so on.

He rolled up the window, leaned back and closed his eyes. Suddenly the beer didn’t want to stay down.

I should see them, he thought, I know that. God, do I know it. I *want* to. But I’m no good to them, to myself, to anyone yet. There’s some unfinished business to take care of first. Then, with luck, I’ll know more—enough to understand and pass along the warning to someone else. Like Bella. And Willie. But until I get my own act together . . .

“Do me a favor,” he told her. “Don’t say anything for a while. It’s nothing personal. Just . . . don’t say anything. All right?”

Ellie handed him a map and he traced a route for them out of the maze of L.A. freeways.

The main arteries were printed in different colors, blue lines feeding into the cloverleaf downtown and thick red lines leading away; it reminded him of a circulatory chart of the human body. They bypassed the central bundle and merged onto a branch which avoided the major interchanges and soon swept them along into open country where the air was still relatively clean and the hills had not yet been subdivided into tacky, jerrybuilt housing developments with exotic names. After an hour or so they were driving into the sun. The warm glare made Challis sleepy.

“. . . My father and I,” he heard her saying. Her voice assumed a low, soothing drone like the air conditioner. “You know what I think started it? A bird.”

“Mmm,” said Challis.

“He bought me this bird in a cage. For my birthday, big deal. I was six. One of those little red-nosed kind, he looked so sad. He wouldn’t sing. So I took him out of the cage and threw him into the sky, like that.”

Challis opened one eye in time to see her lift her hands from the wheel and relive the gesture. Her eyes converged on a distant point, erasing the hills and the years.

“So he could find a place to sing. My dad beat me real good for that. He should have known.”

“Known what?”

“A child never forgives a beating. Like a cat doesn’t.”

She fell silent.

There was only the drone of the tires again, the occasional swish of a car or camper eating up the miles in either direction. Challis extended his legs as best he could and gazed with her at the exit signs whipping past.

“How are we doing?” he asked.

“We’re almost there. Next turnoff, I think. I think . . .”

His eyelashes feathered shut and he allowed himself to fall into a dream.

It was all right. She didn’t need him to tell her what to do. She knew where she was going. She had never been there before, yet he was sure they would make it. Not like Linda, who would only go as far as her limited experience could take her, and then only with his urging and constant support. But this one. Ellie. She was different. An old burden lifted from his chest and rushed away on the wind. It was as easy as the releasing of a breath.

In his dream he awoke to find himself in a place he had never seen before but which was maddeningly familiar.

It was a town of the kind which exist only in dreams, where the safety net of reality is no longer operative and matters of life and death lie in wait around every corner. In this intensified, exaggerated geography Challis was searching desperately for something he could not name. It eluded him at every turn; but the rapidly darkening sky reminded him that his time was about to run out.

It was almost nine o’clock. For some reason the hour took on great significance. How could he complete his task if he did not know what he was looking for? And yet the day was rushing past. With each tick of the clock in the sky, with each scythe-like stroke of the minute hand, time contracted until it was impossible to keep pace. He wanted to rest. But even that ultimate reward would be denied him. If he could not find the solution.

And then. Time. Would stop.

He concentrated on his surroundings—here, where the night fell too soon and the landscape was suffused with mirages of moonlight. In this place, he realized, the only sound to be heard was a great weeping.

It was the weeping of children.

Perhaps they were confused and could not find their way home.

He saw one now, a boy, at the end of a tunnel-like passage where the walls glowed with an orange-red color. The child was dressed strangely, his clothing from another era and his head too large so that it resembled a fully-grown man's. He could not see the boy's features but he heard the crying, muffled as from beneath a false face.

The children, Challis understood with the sudden clarity of dream logic, had disguised themselves so as to pass through this place without harm. They were crying out to warn each other of the danger.

As he listened, he heard the cries become a chorus of wailing throughout the land.

A tall, very tall figure appeared at the end of the tunnel. Challis was not immediately afraid. Apparently the figure was a priest of some kind. Other children, also wearing colorful disguises, came out of hiding and followed the tall man. They trusted him because of the way he was dressed.

The tall guide led them past wood-frame houses, all but hidden by giant oaks in which girlish spirits murmured at their passing, then between modern buildings with clean walls and a succession of rooms in which people were trying to sleep; over the entrance to one, a restless snake climbed a pole or a vine.

They came to a barren plain, dotted with rocks which jutted out of the ground like jagged teeth. A fire was burning. The tall figure stopped and gathered the children into a circle. The sun began to rise between the rocks, and at last the figure turned and revealed itself.

It had no face, only blank, fleshy-white skin with no discernible features and icy eyes lost behind dark slits. It was a face without guilt or remorse or compassion or any vestige of human feeling.

The children fell back.

The figure produced a long, shining device from beneath its robe. The object gleamed there long and curved and silver-red in the eye of the sunrise.

A knife.

The children screamed. Their screams became the mourning wail of human beings everywhere, begging for mercy and the future of their race as the sky became red and runes of blood divided the landscape

of the world.

Wait! cried Challis.

He ran forward to stop the slaughter.

But he was too late.

The figure turned on him, laughing insanely, the knife raised high.

It was nine o'clock . . .

"Want an apple?"

Challis fought his way up.

A glare of red sunlight illuminated the veins in his eyelids. He forced his eyes open.

He was still in the car. Ellie was biting into a ripe, juicy apple and steering with one hand. She gestured at her purse which lay open between them on the seat.

"Have one," she said. "They're good for you."

"Trying to keep the doctor away, eh?" His voice didn't come out right. He massaged his eyes.

The car was climbing a gentle grade above the main highway. It was late, much later than he expected. They had come a long way. The windshield was dirtied with the remains of countless flying insects. He saw a bee smashed under one of the wiper blades.

He drew himself up in the seat.

"There it is," she said.

The car slowed to a halt. She rolled down the window.

A half-mile down, partially hidden by rows of high vegetation, was the tip of a small rural community. The sun was low and from this perspective the simple roofs of the wood-frame houses were shingled by a mirage of silver. Beyond, the Pacific Ocean glittered like spilled mercury flecked with blood.

Challis whistled softly. "Looks innocent enough," he said.

"Why wouldn't it?"

Challis found that difficult to answer.

But perhaps she felt it, too, the sense of foreboding, because her arms were covered with goose-flesh.

Then she put the car into gear again and started the descent.

As the angle changed and the view became less spectacular, Challis tried to break the spell.

"That crappy little place is where all those masks and commercials come from? It doesn't even look real."

Ellie smiled tightly and opened her mouth to speak.

At that moment a truck roared around the bend ahead, bearing

directly at them.

Challis fell across her and jogged the wheel.

An air horn sounded and the truck swerved, scraping by on the shoulder in a cloud of dust.

“Jerk!” she shouted.

Challis spun around in his seat and watched the truck bounce back onto the road. Barely visible through the exhaust was a large green-and-white four-leaf clover decal on the tailgate.

“Silver Shamrock,” said Challis. “I should have—”

“Don’t worry about him. Look at that guy up there! He’s got to stop! He’s—!”

Ellie was straight-arming the horn and bulldogging the wheel as a second bullet Mack truck charged them head-on.

Somehow it got by. The force of its passing left the car rocking like a straw in the wind.

“Welcome,” said Ellie, “to Santa Mira.”

CHAPTER

6

Santa Mira was real, all right.

Challis leaned out the window to clear his head.

He recognized the scent of alfalfa and the dank salt pungence of the sea lacing the air, and something else that was distinctly unpleasant. Sulfur? That was probably what was pouring out of the brick smokestack that dominated the western end of the town. It was billowing with a vengeance. A huge shamrock like the belly of a spider identified the building as the factory. It couldn't be anything else.

At the foot of the rolling hills, nestled at the edge of verdant fields, they came upon an old-fashioned unbranded gas station attached to a weathered cottage motel. RAFFERTY'S DELUXE, proclaimed a hand-painted sign. Whether that was the name of the station or the motel was not clear.

As they drove on, a sandy-haired attendant observed their passing from beside the pumps.

By the time they hit the town square, Challis knew that something about the town was seriously abnormal.

Though it was not yet dark, nothing moved on the street. Not a dog nor a pedestrian nor another automobile. *No one.* Not even children.

Yet, as the storefronts slid by, he was aware of the presence of eyes in every window. There was a shop full of workers' uniforms; there what appeared to be a quaint, tidy bank; there a grocery store, and the like. All were operating under the sign of the Silver Shamrock.

Now a few ruddy faces revealed themselves in doorways, some freckled and red-haired, all silently observant.

Ellie broke the uneasy silence. "Kind of ethnic."

"You could say that."

"I feel like a goldfish."

"Company town," Challis reminded her.

"Irish company town."

"You know where you're going?"

"To the factory. Where do you think?"

"Might be a little late for that. Looks to me like everybody's about

to batten down the hatches and call it a day."

"Well, then, we'll at least get a look at it up close."

The last of the stores fell behind them. Ahead lay a tarnished railroad track and, among the plain, utilitarian residences, an old church of unidentifiable denomination.

As Ellie swung the car around and changed direction, Challis noted that the front of the church was boarded up. The spire had gone long unpainted. A signboard reading CHURCH OF SAINT PATRICK/REV. FATHER TOM MALONE was hanging peeled and broken from one upright.

He decided not to call that detail to her attention. Her knuckles were already white on the steering wheel.

She took her foot off the gas and braked.

There was the plume of smoke and there was the factory. It was visible from all vantage points, but now they were in position to view it head-on. The front of the plant loomed a hundred yards ahead—and *loomed* was precisely the word—huge and eerie, bathed in light that was rapidly deepening to crimson.

"Looks a little spooky," she said.

He did not like the hunch in her shoulders, the contentiousness in her eyes. "What do you expect? They make Halloween masks."

"I'm not ready for this." She sat back. "We need a plan."

Challis reached for a cigarette but his jacket pocket was empty. He remembered that it had been empty for a long time.

"How about this?" he suggested. "We drive down that road, get some more beer, and go to the beach?"

"I'm serious."

He was feeling fresh and awake now and was determined not to let the day end on a note of despair, no matter what. There was always hope. I for one don't need to drive all afternoon to find more doom and gloom, he thought. I can get that at home.

He tried another tack.

"All right, here's one. We go back to that gas station and see if they know anything. We could pose as buyers. Maybe even rent a room at that motel." That sounds eminently reasonable, he thought. Realistic. And realism is what we need. "Then we'd have someplace to talk without the whole town watching."

She accepted that without a blink. "Good point. It's getting late, anyway." She drew her jacket liner closed, pulled her sweater sleeves down over her arms.

They bounded back over the railroad tracks. He thought of taking over the driving for her, letting her rest. But it was a little late for

that. Besides, she was doing fine on her own. And he did like that. He liked it a lot.

"What's that?" she said, her eyes riveted to the rearview mirror.

Challis stretched around.

A winglike metal garage door in the side of the factory was lifting, reflecting like a signal mirror. A long silver limousine purred out into the street, hovered to get its bearings. It was impossible to see the driver behind the tinted windows.

"Probably the boss," said Challis.

They drove on.

The Irishman at Rafferty's Deluxe saw Ellie's car coming. Now his flushed face was all smiles, all charm. As if he were expecting them.

Ellie smiled back.

"Good day to ye! Fill 'er up?"

"Please."

"Ahh, and another grand day it's been in Santa Mira, where the sun smiles down and takes care of its own. A grand day, so it is!"

He chuckled his way to the pump.

My God, thought Challis, is he for real? He's more Irish than that guy who sells green deodorant soap on TV.

"You've got to be kidding," said Ellie under her breath.

She and Challis met each other's eyes.

Challis grinned. "Welcome to Santa Mira, yourself," he told her. "Dublin West."

Rafferty, if that was his name, poked his head back in, quick as an elf.

"Just passing through?"

He was all spongy red nose and uneven teeth from this close. A drinker, thought Challis. That fit the stereotype. Perhaps too well.

Ellie kept her eyes down so as not to let go. She touched her mouth with her fingers and pretended to cough. "No, I—my husband and I —"

Challis chewed his lip.

"—Own a toy store. And we've come to pick up some more masks."

"Ah," waxed Rafferty, "and beauties they are, too!"

Challis could not let the moment pass. He had been biting down for too long. He surprised himself by sliding his left arm around Ellie's shoulders. She was small but soft beneath the jacket liner. He liked that, too.

"You can say that again!" he said too loudly, getting into the role.

“Selling like hotcakes, too!

Rafferty fairly davened at the news. “Good! Good!”

Challis slid even closer. He left his leg against hers. She did not resist. Good clean fun. “Say, pardner. Do you know whether there’s a vacancy next door? My wife and I need a place to stay.” He gave her a patronizing squeeze and felt a suppressed laugh implode through her body. “Don’t we, honey?”

“You’ve come to the right place.” Rafferty winked, actually winked. “I own the motel, too!”

Would wonders never cease?

“Well, rent it, really. Mr. Cochran owns it, o’course. He owns everythin’ around here. But he doesn’t try to tell me how to run my business, and I do the same for him. You see? It all works out. Now here we are . . .”

He fished in his trouser pocket, came up with a large green plastic tab. There was a key attached to it.

Challis winked back.

“Here ’tis! It’s cozy and it’s quiet! And the price is right!”

Rafferty darted ahead of them into the bungalow.

Challis drew Ellie close. “Keep him happy for a minute,” he whispered into her ear.

She nodded and went inside.

“Shower’s a good one,” Challis heard Rafferty saying, his voice magnified by the tiles of the bathroom. “Just put in new pipes last year ..!”

Plumbing clanged and knocked behind him as he moved to the motel office. He made it inside a second before Rafferty followed Ellie out to the car.

“Any bags?”

“Er . . . well, the trunk is stuck.”

Good going, thought Challis.

“My husband knows how to do it. But he went to register.”

Challis knew he had only a moment. The guest book lay open on the counter, next to a wire rack of travel folders. He leafed through the book, searing back through the weeks.

“Got the key?” Rafferty was saying.

October 24, read Challis, *October 23* . . .

“I think it’s this one . . .”

“Let me try it.”

“My goodness, it certainly isn’t stuck anymore, is it?”

“Light packers, aren’t you?”

“We—we’ve had lots of practice.”

“Why, there’s Mr. Cochran now!”

Challis left the guest book and returned in time to see the long silver limousine knife past silently in the encroaching twilight.

Ellie was staring, trying to penetrate the tinted glass.

Don’t be so obvious, he thought. We stick out enough as it is.

He had just stepped off the walkway and onto open ground between the motel and the gas station when a vehicle the size of a house on wheels drove up. It slewed off the road and charged Rafferty’s Deluxe. Challis heard it rattling toward him, its overinflated tires singing over the dirt, before he saw it. By the time he bothered to glance up it was too late. Brakes grabbed, locked, and the Winnebago skidded to a stop less than a yard from his shoes.

“Daddy! *Daddeee!”*

A child’s scream pierced the air as a bicycle detached itself from the top of the Winnebago and crashed down at Challis’s feet.

“Aw, it didn’t hurt it!”

A sloppy, heavy set man jumped out of the driver’s side. He ran forward. Not to Challis, but to the bike.

“Hey, sorry about that,” said the man with a sheepish grin. “Glad it didn’t hit you! And a great big thanks for pickin’ it up!” As an afterthought he added, “You all right?”

He was big, beefy and puffing with small-town enthusiasm and goodwill. He came on like a cross between a used-car salesman and the manager of an ice cream franchise, but it was impossible to dislike such an innocent purely on principle.

He offered his pudgy hand.

“No problem,” muttered Challis.

The hand was soft and moist, an overgrown child’s. Challis was obligated to shake it. Otherwise he might injure the man’s feelings, which were as transparent as water on the air.

“Buddy Kupfer,” announced the man. “And that’s my wife, Betty.”

She climbed out, proud of her dimples and bouffant hair. Perfect, thought Challis. I always wondered what sort of woman marries the president of the Boosters Club; now I know. A match made in Heaven.

“And right here’s *Little* Buddy!”

Which is exactly what he was. Challis was being set upon by a family of overweight Mouseketeers.

“Pleased to meetcha,” said Betty Kupfer.

"Is my bike busted?" asked Little Buddy, on the verge of tears. Without waiting for an answer, the hyperactive boy ran to the bike, spun the wheels, hopped on it and pumped away in the direction of a field of baby melons.

"Don't you dare go in the street, you hear me?" warned his mother.

Enough, thought Challis.

Individually each was a bit obnoxious but not without a certain degree of cornfed charm; together they were an unstoppable force of nature, like kudzu and income taxes, and at the moment Challis was not up to taking on anything of the kind without a couple of Wild Turkeys under his belt.

"I've got to go," he said.

He backed into Rafferty.

"I'll check you in now, sir."

"I filled it out," explained Challis. "There's forty dollars under the blotter. That cover it?"

"Heavens, yes! Thank you, sir. Have a pleasant stay."

Rafferty acknowledged the new arrivals.

"Mr. Kupfer, I presume? Your room is waiting!"

Buddy Kupfer's guileless face clouded over. "Okay now, this *is* a freebie, right? I mean, we could always stay in the RV if we need to."

"I assure you, sir, Mr. Cochran has taken care of everything!"

Challis withdrew to his door. It was that protracted hour of the day when the sun has reached the horizon but the sky has not yet given up the ghost. Flowers were closing, flocks of birds were straggling home from trees and telephone wires, and the first timid lights of evening were beginning to twinkle on. For a city-dweller the effect was hyperreal and hypnotically beautiful. He did not want it to end.

Observing these typecast all-Americans haggling over the family budget, even here, before trusting their sheltered lives into the hands of Rafferty and his Deluxe Motel, Challis was amused and touched rather than offended. At least he, Buddy what's-his-name, is holding them together somehow, thought Challis, no matter what the price. He's a low-potential overachiever with high blood pressure and a tendency to ulcers; his wife's hypoglycemic and undoubtedly a nag, and his kid is badly in need of a prescription for Ritalin. A workaholic prone to fits of depression, not above a shady deal now and then to keep them in doubleknit polyester.

But he's happy, after a fashion. I'll bet he is. Or he thinks he is, most days. And that's more than most of us can say. He's a pretty gutsy fellow in his way, and a lot braver than his wife or Little Buddy or even he himself will ever know. I wish I knew how he does it. How he

keeps himself believing in something. In anything.

“. . .Well, that’s great,” Buddy Kupfer was saying as he met his wife at the back of the recreational vehicle to help her unload a carton of plastic dinnerware. “Honey, it’s a freebie!”

Challis saluted him secretly from the doorstep.

Before he could get the door closed, another car pulled up and parked.

A brassy woman trapped in a holding pattern somewhere between thirty and forty set the brake and climbed out.

She glared at Challis.

“Damn factory!” The way she said it, the second word was a curse. “Got their orders screwed up. Now I have to stay in this dump again. It’s the same story every year, know what I mean?”

She brushed past him and marched for the office.

“I know what you mean.”

Challis smiled and closed the door.

The room was what he expected.

Ellie, however, was a great deal more. She was perched neatly on the double bed, her dark eyes alert, ready for anything.

Challis shook his head.

“This place is a zoo,” he told her.

“I saw Cochran. His car, anyway.” So she was working on it even now. She wouldn’t let go.

“By the way, your old man stayed here on the twentieth.”

She pounced on that fact with the expression of a cat at feeding time. “I was right! Then we should go directly to the factory and see if —”

“Slow down. I could use a drink. We’ve got this room. Let’s take our time.”

“It’s okay with you?” She pulled herself up short and considered him without condescension. Her question was genuine. She’s as straight as they come, he thought. Not a game-player; if she is, she’s the best at it I’ve seen.

“I guess these clothes can hold out another day,” he said. “If you can stand me.”

She unlatched her overnight bag and eyed the bathroom. Probably to change.

On the other side of the paper-thin wall, Buddy and Betty and Little Buddy were banging doors and installing the artifacts of their lifestyle with suburban abandon.

“I could always get another room,” he offered.

She eyed him up and down. Was she smirking? There wasn't enough light to be sure.

"That would look sort of suspicious, wouldn't it?" she asked evenly.

She was so trusting.

She doesn't even know me, and listen to her. For all she can tell I'm some kind of psycho, Jack the Ripper with a black bag of nasty tricks concealed somewhere on my person at this very moment. She's not naive; but her faith is alarming.

She's made the right decision this time, of course. Very perceptive of her.

He said, "What I mean is, if it would make you more comfortable I can sleep in the car. That would probably be better than the floor, anyway."

Without hesitation she said, "Surely we can do better than that."

Then, in one of those rare epiphanies that make life worth living, she unfolded her legs from the bed and came to him. She stood inches away.

"Where do you *want* to sleep, Doctor Challis?"

Here he was fumbling around with formalities, and she had already made up her mind. Somewhere along the line he had lost the lead, if ever he had had it. She had, as the saying goes, let him continue, and all along he had been egotistical enough to believe that he had the advantage. Well, damn her sweet hide.

"That," he said, "is a dumb question, Miss Grimbridge."

The orange light of sundown painted the curtains in the room a color that became more intense with each passing second.

THE MASKS COME OFF

CHAPTER

7

He locked the motel room door behind him and walked to the office.

Rafferty was nowhere in sight, but the brassy woman from the next cabin was busy at the pay phone.

“Yes, they screwed it up!” she was saying. “What? Tomorrow, I hope. If they don’t, I’m having somebody’s head for lunch, I can tell you that!”

She acknowledged Challis and silently mouthed a question. Before he could respond she said into the phone, “All right. Hold the fort. *Ciao.”* She hung up. “It’s all yours.”

“What?”

“This is too much, isn’t it? No phones in the rooms, no one around when you need ’em, showers that look like something left over from a Hitchcock movie . . . You need change?”

“No. Actually, I was going to ask you if you know where a person can get something to drink.”

“Hah! I know the feeling. Good luck. There’s nothing around here for fifty miles but pumpkin fields and potato-eaters. And this cruddy motel. I knew I was going to get stuck here tonight, I just knew it!”

“If this is an Irish town, they must have a watering hole.”

“If you find one, let me know.” She busied herself reorganizing her purse. It was big enough to strap onto her back, if she were so inclined. “Picking up an order?”

“Oh,” said Challis. “Yeah.”

“I figured. There’s no other reason to be in this godforsaken place. Their masks may be fabulous, but they’re not too swift up here, know what I mean?” She tapped her head. “I’m Marge Guttman, by the way.”

They shook hands. “Dan . . . Smith,” he said. He was instantly appalled at his own lack of imagination. “I’m here with my wife.”

“Well, lotsa luck, Mr. Smith.” She was so wrapped up in her own melodrama she accepted the name without batting an eye. “I just don’t see any excuse for it. I called my order in day before yesterday. They said it would be ready. I’ve got a business to run. If they think I’m going to stay here again just because somebody shuffled the wrong

papers, then they've got another think coming!"

There was a great hostility pent up inside her, something disproportionately dark and vicious straining to get out. Challis hoped he wouldn't be around when and if it found its ultimate release.

"They must be working pretty hard," he suggested, "to get everything out by Halloween. I mean, they're even working Saturdays and Sundays—pretty hard to believe!"

"Well, they'd better try to do it a little bit faster, that's all I can say. Their masks are great, but since they started doing big-volume business the little guy has to stand in line, y'know what I mean? I gave up ordering by mail, but I hate trying to deal with them in person. You can't win."

She extracted a green witch mask from her oversized purse and waved it as evidence.

"And I hate to say it, but the merchandise is slipping. I mean, my four-year-old was throwing this thing against the wall, granted, but the trademark shouldn't just come right off! These masks used to be the best. I'm going to complain. *There* it is."

A small, round trade seal with the Silver Shamrock logo on it shook free of the folds and rolled across the floor. Challis stooped and picked it up. It was embossed metal, the size of a quarter. No, not metal. Some sort of ceramic. He turned it over in his fingers.

On the reverse was a grid of tiny engraved lines. Incredibly, it appeared to be some sort of microchip.

"See what I mean?" asked Marge.

"Where did you get this?"

"I told you, it came off the mask. Can you believe it? Hey, you don't know anything about electronics, by any chance?"

"Not really. What's it for?"

"Well, all I know is, this thing looks like the inside of my transister radio. Why would they put one on a mask?"

"It would be expensive," said Challis. He handed it back to her. "I don't get it."

"It's a mystery to me, too. You got any batteries with you?"

"Batteries?"

"The ones in my radio are shot. Hell, I don't know what I'm doing, but I thought maybe I could get it to play or light up or whatever it's supposed to do."

"Be careful," said Challis.

"Why?"

Challis couldn't answer that. He shrugged. "You're sure this came

off the mask?"

"Sure I'm sure. Oh, believe me, it's probably some stupid mixup. I told you before. At the lower levels of this organization, they're just out to lunch. I'm going to throw it smack on that Cochran's desk first thing in the morning. What a character. Did you know he's supposed to be one of the richest men in the country? And he got there selling cheap gags and Halloween masks. There's hope for me yet." She approached him conspiratorially. "I also heard that he lives here. Right in the factory."

"Is that right?" It was all too much after the long trip. Challis longed to be outside. "Well, I hope you get some answers. If you do, let me know. We're in Cabin One."

"Oh, I will, I will. Now if I can get ahold of some batteries . . ."

"I've got to go."

Marge snapped her fingers. "Package store."

"I beg your pardon?"

"There's a store, liquor store I think, on the way into town. Back two or three blocks, then north over the railroad tracks, you know, where they first cut in? They've got to stay open after dark or these bozos wouldn't have anything to do. I don't even think they get TV here."

"Thanks," said Challis sincerely. A liquor store. His mouth was dry just thinking about it. "Take care of yourself, Mrs. Guttman. Maybe we'll see you tomorrow."

"I hope not. I mean, I hope to get everything straightened out bright and early so I can get back up north. My shop's on Union Square in San Fran. You can't miss it. Look me up."

"Thanks, I will."

"Oh, and Mr. Smith?"

"Yeah?"

"Do me a favor and see if they've got any batteries at that store? I want to find out what this thing *does* before I go in to see Mr. Big in the morning." She brandished the piece of microcircuitry, if that was what it was. "Otherwise, I'll have to start poking around with what I've got, hook it up to my hair dryer or God knows what, to find out what it really is. It's electronic, I can tell that much. I want some answers. And I'm not leaving till I get 'em!"

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T. MALONE'S

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The letters of the sign buzzed like fireflies over his head as he witnessed the coming of the night to Santa Mira.

The short street on which he stood led into darkness in either direction. A few strategic sodium-vapor lamps winked on here and there; cones of light extended down from them, revealing nothing except columns of lace-winged insects gathering and flying the beams like souls ascending to Heaven. A large bird passed over the liquor store, beating the air with a disturbing, leathery rhythm.

As far as he could see there was not another human being anywhere, save for the buttered sleepwalker who had rung up his purchase inside. The UPC code lines and automated register had made it easy. It had been all that one could do to take his money.

He clutched the paper sack, zipped his jacket and retraced his way back.

After a block and a half he was sure something was wrong with his ears.

He stood still and listened.

In the distance, another set of footsteps also stopped.

Curious.

Now crickets resumed their sawing chirrup in blackened doorways, and somewhere beyond the ripe fields a great white sound of water boomed like a heart beneath the earth. The night surrounding Santa Mira was alive, but the town itself was as quiet as a graveyard.

He resumed walking.

So did the second pair of shoes.

It was an illusion, he decided. Something to do with the location. The total absence of traffic, so ever-present in the city that it went unnoticed, served to heighten his sense of hearing so that distance played tricks with his ears. A block could turn into acres of impenetrable darkness, another simple street might continue for a mile in the polluted air, the stars multiplying into roadways of diamond dust and the moon close enough to touch. And so the slightest echo would probably ricochet all the way out to the hills and back.

That was enough to throw anybody off.

The important thing was not to forget where you were.

There was the alley. It would lead him back to the motel.

He picked up the pace and entered it.

A single security light illuminated the refuse ahead: a trash bin, boxes, lumber studded with nails, a stack of broken plate-glass windows. Wadded newspapers and packing excelsior blew along close to the ground, the detritus of unknown shipments the purpose of which he could only guess at. But it was getting late, too late to worry about any of that now.

He ignored the would-be clues and pressed on.

In front of him, a tattered figure rounded the corner and nearly knocked him over.

"Jesus . . . !" He jumped back, startled.

Beneath the wide-brimmed hat was an old face, covered with stubble and deeply creased from too many years out of doors and out of luck. The expression in the eyes was rat-shrewd. It was a look Challis had seen all his life, in bus depots and skid-row clinics in every city he had worked. The face was no more than forty years old by the calendar. But they had been forty long, hard years.

"Ho, mister!" Like a whipped dog the tattered man sidled closer while bracing to run. "Didn't mean to scare you." His eyes dropped to chest level. "I just saw that bottle of yours and thought it looked pretty heavy."

Challis realized how tightly he was holding the bag. He was strangling the glass neck through the twisted brown paper.

"I ain't got no diseases," said the tattered man, "and I wager I keep myself as clean as you do." He scratched his T-shirt and tried to close his ill-fitting coat. "How about a drink?"

This place wasn't so different. Challis was relieved. "Sure," he said, holding out the bottle.

The man unscrewed the cap and took a long pull. His exposed Adam's apple bobbed in the stray light. "Mmm! God damn." He handed the bottle back and smacked his lips. "Thank you."

He made ready to move on.

Challis played a wild card. "Hey!"

The man started to return, expecting everything and nothing.

"You know anything about this big wheel named Cochran?"

"Huh!" The man sneered. "Do I know anything? Why, he made Santa Mira what it is today—a dried-up little pile of nothing!"

His eyes saddened.

"Used to be a pretty nice spot. Good people. Not anymore. He bought 'em all. Every one of 'em. Except me. I didn't have anything to sell."

Challis remained patient. The man was eager to talk. His eyes narrowed and his tone became impassioned.

"I tried to get a job in this place." He might have been testifying before a judge. "Let me tell you something. He brought in every damn one of them factory people from the outside." He spat. "You think he'd hire me? Local boy? No way. Turned me down flat! So I make my money the hard way . . . You don't have a dollar to spare, do you?"

The story was worth a dollar. Challis reached for his change from the store. With his other hand he offered the bottle again.

"Mmm! God damn. Thank you."

The man wiped his mouth on his sleeve. His eyes found Challis.

"All I can tell you, mister, is watch out. You seen the TV cameras yet? He's watching you, friend, I guarantee you that."

Emboldened by the drink, he assumed a fighting stance and cupped his hands around his mouth, shouting at the rooftops.

"Hey, Cochran! FUCK YOU!"

Challis grabbed his shoulder. "Hey, take it easy!" He scanned the alley suspiciously. Was that the eye of a lens high up on the fence? He couldn't be sure. It might as easily have been a cat's eye, a piece of glass. But he didn't want to take any chances.

The tattered man backed off and chopped the air with his hand. "It's all right," he said pugnaciously. "Don't matter to me. He's probably listening. And if he is, I got one thing to say. This is the last Halloween for that lousy factory of his! They're pulling some wild shit in there. I've heard rumors . . ."

He staggered on his way.

"This year I'm gon' get me about a case and a half of Molotov cocktails, mister. Burn that sum-bitch right down to the ground. *The last Halloween, all right . . . !"*

He disappeared into the shadows at the end of the alley.

Without thinking Challis found himself pacing the man. Where would the only pedestrian he had seen so far in this town be going?

It was worth another minute of his time to find out.

Beyond the alley was an old railroad trestle and, jutting out of the shadows below it, the jumble of a wrecking yard. The man in the wide-brimmed hat was lecturing himself as he stumbled between rusted auto bodies and old tires on the way to a corrugated lean-to. Challis saw him squeeze inside, and soon an old railroad lantern was fired up. Yellow light poked feebly out of the shack.

Standing there under the stars, Challis had a drink himself.

They survive, he thought, the slow and the stubborn, the old

individualist misfit sons of pioneers who won't allow themselves to be folded, stapled, or spindled. The revolutions come and go, nations are torn apart and rebuilt, the climate changes to make way for the next millenium; the snow on the wheel turns and the century ices. Men like machines walk on the moon and machines like men remake the world in their own image; the iron dream rears its head again in a new age; the old tribes fade from sight in the long night of the human soul.

But, somehow, the old ways survive. They abide, and they prevail. They find a way.

Or it could be I'm just sentimentalizing the whole thing. Poverty, stupidity . . .

Maybe I've always overrated my motives. My years at the clinic, the hospital—maybe I'm not so God damned noble as I think. Maybe I've never really done it for them. I have to see them as more romantic than they are in order to rationalize the price I've paid in my own life. I was willing to do anything rather than face my real needs. Is it possible?

Physician, heal thyself.

Yeah, he thought. Begin at the end of your own nose. The long view doesn't mean much until you can live in your own house justified.

In the distance, the tattered man reappeared balancing a palmful of soda crackers and a pressurized can of processed cheese food. The air was crystal-clear, the scene as sharp as a magic realist painting. The man suspended his diatribe long enough to unload a long strand of the cheese directly into his mouth. Then he began singing a song. Crackers flew out of his mouth like moths.

The last member of a dying breed in Santa Mira was making it through another night.

Challis didn't want to disturb him.

He moved on.

Before he got back to the cabin, he did notice two other pedestrians, however. They were at the edge of the grounds, near the tracks. No, this place wasn't so out of the ordinary, after all. Two typical businessmen in regulation-issue three-piece suits, walking back in the direction of the junkyard, strolling in a slow, relaxed rhythm.

Probably on their way to get a drink, he thought.

His thinking mellowed for the time being.

Behind him, the tattered man's singing rose in pitch until it was a defiant cry at the moon.

CHAPTER

8

Ellie came out of the shower wrapped in a towel.

She had the radio on. As he stripped the glasses of their sanitary paper coverings and poured out two husky drinks, she lay down on the bed and pretended not to watch him. Her eyes were heavy-lidded and she was smiling like a cat.

He could have spoken, but thought better of it.

He carried the drinks to the bed and sat down.

She took hers from him.

What am I doing here? he thought.

He took the drink down in one toss. He got up, measured out another and brought the bottle back with him.

Her glass was only half-empty.

She doesn't even need it, he thought.

The silence, broken only by the music and a cricket outside the window, became a barrier. The longer it went on the harder it was to break.

But it did not seem to trouble her. She set her glass on the night table. The light from the aged lampshade gave her skin the texture of warm wax.

My God, he thought. At a time like this Linda would have a million things to say. I would not be able to shut her up. But this one . . . she's comfortable with herself, and so with me. She knows what she wants.

I wouldn't want the wrong thing to happen, he thought. We have a lot more time to spend together. There had better not be any problems between us. We already have enough to worry about on this trip.

She uncapped a bottle of baby oil and began stroking it onto her legs.

Pretty sure of herself, isn't she? he thought.

"Pretty sure of yourself, aren't you?" he asked at last.

"Shouldn't I be?"

The radio played on and she proceeded with her baby oil. Eventually she put some on her arms and neck. Her skin glistened like rose petals with dew. She began to rub it into the hollow of her throat. Then below her collarbone.

The night was a wall outside the window, insulating them from the world.

He touched the underside of her leg. To know how it would feel.

She was still warm from the shower, soft and steamed. It was the softest skin he had ever touched.

She tilted her head questioningly.

He didn't know the answer.

There was no longer any question.

He moved to her.

The music on the radio gave way to an advertisement.

"TWO MORE DAYS TO HALLOWEEN, HAL-LO-WEEN, HAL-LO-WEEN . . ."

Challis sighed a sigh that was like all the breaths he had ever drawn in his life going out at once.

"I don't believe this commercial," he said. Her breath was on him. "It doesn't stop."

She turned the radio off.

He laid his mouth into the tenderest part of her neck. It fit perfectly.

There was a sound from the cabin two doors down.

"What was that?" said Ellie.

"Mmm."

"I mean it. It sounded like—"

"Woman in Three."

"Marge? I talked to her while you were gone."

"So did I."

"I like her. She reminds me of my mother."

What? thought Challis. Marge Guttman is no older than I am. She's —

His heart sank out of his body and through the floor.

"How old are you?" he said.

"Relax. I'm older than I look."

So am I, he thought. "But you *are* eighteen?" He was only half-kidding.

"Boy, are you dumb," said Ellie, and rolled over on top of him.

The towel fell away. He gave up and kissed her. He didn't have to kiss her again. The first one lasted a long time.

There was a louder noise, a chair or table being knocked over this time.

Then a scream.

Challis sat up. “Batteries,” he said.

“Hmm?”

“I told her to leave it alone.” The hair on the back of his neck was standing up. “I shouldn’t have given it back to her. There’s no telling what—”

“What are you talking about?”

“Stay here.”

“Not on your life, Doctor.”

She threw a robe over her and followed him out the door.

“Marge?” called Ellie. “Are you all right in there?”

No answer.

The door was ajar. Had someone else—?

At first they didn’t see her.

The lamp was on the floor, which created harsh shadows on the walls. There was a large pocket of darkness on the chair, something, a pile of clothes or—

On closer inspection it was not a pile of clothes.

No.

Ellie clamped her hands over her mouth and was sick.

Challis steadied her, pushed her out.

He had seen many emergency patients arrive at the hospital over the years. He had seen bodies butchered in collisions, skulls crushed like rotten eggs, torsos ripped open by rusty knives, faces smashed to pulp, limbs dangling by threads, gangrenous organs spilling into his hands. Yes, he had seen all of these things and more. Human beings racked by disease, wounds festering, eyeballs driven out of their sockets from within. He had witnessed complete autopsies and open-heart surgery. Once, in medical school, he had dissected a cadaver. And so on, *ad nauseum.*

But he had never seen anything like this.

He fought down his gag reflex.

This one was not a statistic on a slab. It was a woman he had met only an hour ago. She had been vibrant with the life force and in perfect health, as full of fight as a pit bull and ready to go the limit with anyone or anything for what she believed in.

But not anymore.

The lamp had been knocked over in the first convulsions. On the table was the ceramic chip, now seared white and frosted with ash. It had burned a spot into the tabletop. Next to it was a bent bobby pin and a small jeweler’s screwdriver.

He picked up the chip in his handkerchief. It was still hot.

Somehow she remained upright in the chair in an incomprehensible defiance of gravity. She still wore her glasses, in a manner of speaking. They drooped over what was left of her nose. The frame was melted into her face.

Tiny rivulets of blood seeped from every pore. Her eyes were filled with blood, the pupils gone. And her mouth. Her mouth was open, distended forward and torn to shreds by a force that had snapped off teeth and rendered her lips into streaming filaments of skin.

Challis approached, and heard the barely audible exhaust whisper of a still-human wailing from somewhere deep inside her chest cavity.

As he reached for a pulse, something—*something*—moved within the woman's mouth.

What?

Challis bent closer.

It was black and pearlescent. Her tongue? No.

No, it was not her tongue at all.

From out of the croaking hiss of her mined throat crawled the wet, obscene legs of a living black spider.

Challis bolted for the door.

Ellie was wild, disoriented. She started across the doorway. He grasped her arms and propped her against the cabin.

"Don't move," he ordered. "And don't look. It's going to be all right."

"No, it's not! How can you say that? Nothing's been right since—since what happened to my father! That wasn't all right! And this is just like it! Something insane that nobody can underst—!"

He shook her into submission and held her close.

Then he had to leave her.

He ran to the Kupfers' room.

"Buddy!"

Before Buddy could answer, Rafferty poked his head out of the office. He set the phone back on its cradle and wandered out.

"There's a woman down there," Challis explained. "She's had a—a seizure. Get an ambulance right—"

"Seizure?" said Rafferty.

Challis felt the earth tremble. He looked up.

Several late-model cars were converging on the scene, led by a van bearing the sign of the shamrock.

"Don't trouble yourself, sir," said Rafferty. "I heard the accident and looked in on her. I've taken care of everything. She'll get the best care money can buy."

Challis stood by in amazement as a carload of white-suited men poured into Cabin Three. They were dressed similarly to medical technicians, but not the same. He had never seen coats quite like these before. Some detail was not right. He could not put his finger on what it was.

Challis attempted to follow them in.

“I’m a doctor. I found her like this a few minutes ago. She screamed, and then—”

They shuffled him out of the way and brought her out lashed to a stretcher. They did not take time for any emergency measures. They did not bother to examine her. It was as if they were working against a deadline.

“Hey, I told you I’m a doctor! This woman is badly in need of—”

They loaded her into the back of the van.

Challis intervened and bodily prevented them from closing the doors.

“Who is taking responsibility for this patient?” he demanded.

He was gently but firmly lifted aside.

“Why, Mr. Cochran, of course,” said Rafferty, following the activity. “And wouldn’t you know it? There he is now! Never far away when he’s needed.”

The big silver Cadillac docked in front of the motel. The back door opened wide and a distinguished, white-haired man with mirror-polished shoes and an immaculate black suit disembarked. He unfolded to his full height, an effortless motion like an oiled machine. He straightened up and up. His clear, penetrating eyes found the proprietor.

“Evening, Mr. Rafferty,” he said benignly. He possessed the kindly, self-assured air of an undertaker.

Rafferty scraped and bowed. “Mr. Cochran! Good to see you, sir!”

The white-haired man towered over the crowd. His untroubled gaze passed over Rafferty’s head and paused briefly at Challis and Ellie before panning to take in the rest of the small congregation.

There were the Kupfers, Buddy and his wife and son, huddled together in nightclothes as if to watch a pyrotechnics display on a summer evening. Several more unknown faces had emerged from other cabins to witness the disturbance.

Cochran lifted his hands in the manner of a preacher about to lead a communal prayer.

“It’s all over, friends. A small accident. The lady will be given the best of care, I can assure you of that.”

Chin raised high, Cochran smiled to dismiss them all.

He tapped his ring finger on the driver's door of the van. A white-garbed attendant rolled down the window.

"I don't like this," said Challis tajutly, but no one was listening.

No one had seen anything. Ellie was out of it. He was on his own.

He followed Cochran.

"Where are they taking her?"

Cochran broke off his conversation with the driver and turned, unruffled.

"Why, they're taking her to the factory. We have a wonderful facility there for emergency treatment."

Surprised to hear that, Challis withdrew a couple of steps.

Cochran resumed his consultation with the driver.

The crowd thinned out and grumbled back to their rooms. Soon there would be no indication that any of it had happened.

But it's important, thought Challis. It matters. This woman matters.

The tailgate closed and locked.

Challis, standing next to the van, shaded his eyes and peeked in through a small observation window.

There was Marge Guttman. Her litter was locked down to the floorboard and her body was covered with a sheet up to the neck, A methodical technician was unrolling a layer of gauze over what remained of her face. No I.V., no respirator, no medical equipment of any kind was in evidence.

They were doing nothing for her—*nothing.*

Challis was enraged. He pounded the steel side panel and peered deeper.

He was about to run back and yank the tailgate off its hinges and force some answers from these white-coated efficiency experts, when he caught sight of something else inside the van.

There was another stretcher farther forward, behind the cab, at right angles to Marge Guttman. It, too, bore the weight of a white-sheeted figure. On this one, too, the sheet was drawn up to the neck. But a few inches of dirty T-shirt and rumpled collar showed above the cover.

It was unmistakably the tattered man, the panhandler from the shanty under the railroad trestle. Though his head was in shadow, Challis was sure of it.

No one else in Santa Mira dressed like that.

A company car drove off, its headlights momentarily sweeping the van. A reflection of light scattered through the interior, and then the

car was gone and the stretchers inside the van were dim phantoms.

But for a second there had been just enough light to show Challis what was wrong with the tattered man's head, why he couldn't see it.

What was wrong with his head was that he didn't have one.

Challis reeled back on his heels. It must have been an optical illusion, a trick of perspective. *It's dark, my eyes—*

"All right," Cochran was saying to the driver. Challis barely made out the words. "What happened?"

The driver stuck his head out the window. "It was a misfire. She must have—"

The driver noticed Challis and ducked back in.

Cochran turned again. In the departing headlights, the movement appeared to take an uncommonly long time, stopping and starting, stopping and starting with the jerkiness of a slowed-down film.

Before he could say anything, Challis felt a hand on his arm.

"Don't," whispered Ellie. She appeared to be in control again. "We can't afford it."

He wanted to tell her that she hadn't seen what was in the van. Then he remembered that she had seen Mrs. Guttman. And her father. That was enough.

Challis backed off without another word. For the moment.

Cochran was unperturbed. He waited until the van and the other company cars were gone and the bystanders were back in their rooms. Then he adjusted his cuffs, gave the motel a last, approving glance, like a shepherd overseeing his flock, and returned to his silver limousine.

As soon as the grounds were clear Challis ran for the phone in the office. Fortunately Rafferty was occupied elsewhere. He made his call and slipped back to Cabin One in the belief that he had not been seen.

Ellie dragged him back inside and sat him on the bed.

"A *misfire?"* said Challis. "Did you hear that? What the hell were they talking about?"

"There's something crazy going on here," said Ellie with breathtaking understatement. "Did you call the police?"

"I called the sheriff in Sierra Mesa. I don't even think they have a police force around here. If they do, Cochran's probably running the show. He runs everything else."

"What did he say?"

"I started to lay it all on him. For some reason he didn't let me finish. He said to get the hell out and phone it in from Leytonville. He must know something we don't. Odd . . ."

“What?”

“When I asked him how the investigation’s going back there, he said —oh, it doesn’t make sense.”

“Don’t do this to me! He was my father. I have a right to know who killed—”

“All right. He said there was a mistake of some kind. The body of that man who burned up in the parking lot? They examined the wrong specimen. There wasn’t much left. Got him mixed up with the dashboard or something. All they had was a big pile of plastic.”

Challis eyed her for a reaction.

She had the kind of face that would never give her away, not unless she wanted it to. But her spine was rigid as a ramrod.

“Want to leave?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Ellie intensely. “Very much. But not until I find out what happened when my father went to that factory.”

You can run, thought Challis. But you can’t hide.

FINAL PROCESSING

CHAPTER

9

The morning sun was a white-hot eye in the sky over Santa Mira.

The early mist burned out of the fields, a fine gauze of steam unwinding from the vines and rutted irrigation beds. Challis divided the curtains and saw a jury of black crows disarranging the yellow-green creepers of a pumpkin bed that had been neglected in the harvesting. The largest of the melons were cracked open like fiery skulls, with shriveled features pecked into their faces to reveal decay within.

He let go of the curtains and the room was a haven once more.

Ellie stirred on the bed.

She stretched her arms up and curved her hands by the soft oval of her face. Her dark curls were tangled on the pillow.

She had not fallen asleep till the moon was low. That she had slept at all was a very special dispensation. She had clung to him through the night with a fierceness he had never known. It both frightened and exhilarated him. But it was a precarious edge he could not maintain much longer. Shortly before dawn he had felt the abyss opening beneath him. Shadows on the wall had taken on form and the dripping faucet in the bathroom had become a clock ticking away the minutes of his life. The fevered sleep that followed for him was worse than no sleep at all.

A car rumbled past on its way to the factory, and the Kupfers were already singing in the shower and flushing their toilet repeatedly.

Challis fingered one of the instant coffee service packets left in the rooms for guests of the motel. But his body was too near the breaking point to handle a dose of caffeine nerves now.

The smell of fresh coffee, though, would not hurt. Linda used to wake him with it every morning as soon as the children were up . . .

But that was years ago. Years and years; another lifetime.

It was not until some time later, when the sun was past its zenith and slanting in through the curtains, that Ellie sat up in the battlefield of sheets.

“Hi,” she said, and yawned.

“Hi.”

“You let me sleep.”

“You needed it.”

“What time is it?”

“Afternoon.”

She shook her head clear and the curls fell into place. Just like that. She thought for a few seconds. Then it all came back to her. It was like a physical blow forcing her out of bed.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” she told him, and reached for her jeans. “We have to get over there.”

Her breasts were high and firm. She paused once, with her blouse halfway buttoned.

“I want you to know something,” she said.

“Yeah?” He was afraid to hear it, but wrote that off to paranoia.

She tucked in her blouse and said with great solemnity, “I wouldn’t have tried all this if you hadn’t come along. You know that, don’t you?”

He wasn’t sure how to take it.

She came over to him. When he didn’t touch her at once, she leaned into his chest and held his lapels. Her hair smelled impossibly sweet.

“So thanks,” she said.

He breathed again and closed his arms around her.

Don’t thank me, he thought. Not yet.

The factory was humming with activity. Overheated trailer trucks arrived empty and departed with their mudguards dragging in the dirt. Challis parked Ellie’s Oldsmobile at the south side.

Without any trouble they soon found their way to a door marked OFFICE.

The first thing they saw inside was a Silver Shamrock trademark dominating one wall like an expanding map of the world. Above it in the reception area hung a fatherly portrait of their founder, Conal Cochran, all silver hair and stylish benevolence.

Challis wondered if the employees were required to genuflect on their way in and out.

A short hall led to a central receiving counter, where a dedicated hive of office workers made busy with bills of lading. The most Irish-looking was clearly in charge. Of course. Challis made a sound to get her attention.

“May I help you?”

“Yes,” said Ellie. “I—my father put in an order last week.

Something's gone wrong. We never received it."

The secretary's rosy cheeks inflated in a pleasant smile. "What firm do you represent?"

"Grimbridge's, Sierra Mesa."

"Just a moment," lilted the secretary.

She sorted through a desk piled high with orders. Challis heard typewriters and telephones chiming from all directions. Office personnel puttered between desks and files. Yet the ambience was not entirely convincing.

It's the voices, thought Challis. *There are none.* No one else has spoken a word except into a telephone since we walked in.

He put his mouth over Ellie's ear. "Have you noticed . . . ?" he began.

"There must be some mistake, dearie," said the secretary. Nothing would furrow that brow of hers. She proffered a yellow form. "Mr. Grimbridge himself picked up that order on the twenty-first. Here's his signature."

Ellie relieved her of the form. "Hmm. Well. Er—thank you. Do you remember the transaction?"

"No," said the secretary, unruffled, "but you can talk to someone who might."

She rang a button on the counter.

Immediately a broad-shouldered man with red hair entered from the back. Again, something was off-center. The timing was too pat. He would almost have had to be standing on the other side of the door, waiting for a signal to come in.

"Red? These people lost an order." She took the bill back. "Did you load this one?"

"Sure did," he said promptly. "Last week. Man in an old green station wagon."

Ellie gasped. "That's right! Did he say where he was going?"

"No, ma'am. He headed out to the north, though. I remember that."

Ellie's eyes narrowed. "Thank you."

"Are you going to place another order?" said the secretary.

"No." That was that. Ellie took Challis's arm.

"Let's go."

Before they could get back up the hall, heavy footsteps plodded around the bend and the Kupfers arrived, blocking the way. Challis drew Ellis aside.

Big Kupfer planted himself flat-footed before the counter.

"Well!" he said. "How you doin'?" He held out his meaty hands and

attracted his clan to him. He announced proudly, “Buddy Kupfer and family to see Mr. Cochran!”

The secretary had the same rosy smile for them, too. “Yes, Mr. Kupfer. Welcome! I’ll tell Mr. Cochran you’re here.”

Little Buddy tugged at his father’s doubleknit leisure suit. “When do we get to see ’em makin’ the masks?”

“Real soon, Little Buddy, real soon.”

The child wandered off, sat restlessly and took a pocket computer game out of his high-water pants. The game produced a volley of blipping noises.

Betty Kupfer was having trouble with something under her skirt. She wrinkled her powdered face. “Buddy,” she confided, “I’m bushed already.”

Big Buddy’s face fell. He set his bulk stubbornly. “C’mon! The fun’s just starting.”

Ellie said behind her hand, “I’ve seen enough. Let’s get out of here.”

There was a new agitation at the back of the office.

The typewriters silenced. Only the ringing of a telephone and Little Buddy’s battery-powered war-gaming broke the tension.

“Wait one more minute,” said Challis.

A door opened and Cochran himself sauntered in, a living picture of health and goodwill. He had on a dark blue suit that fit his tall frame like a glove, and a spectacular tie blossomed on his white silk shirt.

He held out his hands.

“So *this* is Buddy Kupfer and his lovely family! My friends, Mr. Kupfer has sold more Silver Shamrock masks this year, by far, than anyone else in the country.”

He clasped his hands together in praise.

The office workers broke into a tattoo of applause.

Cochran took possession of Buddy’s hand and beamed until the champion salesman was ready to bust his buttons.

Betty flushed.

“If she cries,” whispered Ellie, “I’ll throw up.”

Little Buddy picked his nose.

Cochran would not let go of Buddy’s paw. “Silver Shamrock likes to do something special for its champion each year, and that’s why you’ve been invited here. I hope your stay is a merry one, so I do!”

The milk of human kindness was dripping oleaginously from his lips.

Buddy pumped Cochran’s hand in return. He would not quit. He blushed beet-red. “Thank you! Thank you, sir!”

At this point he would have polished Cochran's shoes with the oil on his nose if asked.

"Do you think this is a little off-the-wall?" whispered Ellie. "Or is it just me?"

The applause died down and the workers returned to their papers. On cue.

Cochran repossessed his hand. He fastened his penetrating gaze on the two unscheduled spectators.

"And to my other friends, Mr. and Mrs.—?"

"Smith," Challis deadpanned.

"Smith." Cochran's eyes embraced them. "Of course. My apologies for last night's disturbance. I want you both to know that Miss Guttman is going to be fine. She's been flown to a hospital in San Francisco."

Right, thought Challis. And chickens have lips. Sure they do.

"And as to the confusion over your order—" Had he been listening at the door? "—Let me simply say that a replacement is being prepared for you at this very moment, absolutely free. It's on me."

Buddy was falling all over himself. "Is he incredible, or what?" he wanted to know.

"And now, Mr. Kupfer, a guided tour for you and your family." Cochran spread his hands, about to lead them on a pilgrimage. "And for our other friends, of course, if they would like to come."

Challis and Ellie traded uneasy glances.

Cochran's smile nailed them where they stood. It was so broad it was mocking.

Ellie threw an impudent smile back at him.

"By all means!" she said.

"I don't think I trust that guy," whispered Challis, imitating her brand of dry understatement, as they followed the procession through a high door.

Ellie tried on her most cheerful expression. "Me neither," she said through her sparkling teeth.

Cochran took the lead.

"The latex is heated and poured in, then cooled and poured off. Then it's all trimming, painting and packaging . . ."

The maskworks was a long, spacious room sectioned by benches and presided over by unspeaking production-line workers. The tables and floor were a pearly gray from the dusting and powdering of the molds and masks. The lighting was indirect and perpetual; it could have been

high noon or the middle of the night. That and the fact that there were no clocks reminded Challis of one of the small casinos in downtown Las Vegas.

The staff in their green smocks labored without complaint, humorless sleepwalkers treading back and forth to redistribute stacks of flesh-colored rubber between the tables. One tall worker with deepset eyes and curly hair removed an intermediate stage of a witch's head as if turning a surgical glove inside out. The material popped into shape, revealing deepset eye sockets and a prognathic brow not unlike those of its handler.

Challis steered Ellie forward.

Where's the Muzak? he wondered. Without it, what keeps them so contented? They act like they're hypnotized. Or drugged.

That, he thought, might not be so far out of the question . . .

"And now I'd like to take you all one level deeper," said Cochran. "This way, please."

He unlocked a door marked PRIVATE and descended a steep stairway.

They saw his manicured hand beckoning them deeper.

For a few steps he was out of their sight. The light clarified; Challis concentrated on what lay ahead.

They were entering a portion of Cochran's own quarters.

It was a low-ceilinged cellar which had been remade into a compact museum of the company's best models, the secret sanctum of a lifetime collector.

One entire wall was inset with false heads of the most elaborate and imaginative designs. Here a sculpted ghoul so real its eyes might have been following Little Buddy on his mad dash down the aisle; there a cobra head large enough to swallow a man whole; and there a withered crone, meticulously detailed right down to glued hairs and stippled pores, with a homuncular second face attached unborn to its left cheek.

"Oh, wow!" said Buddy Senior, whistling low. "This is it! This is really it. Hall of Fame time . . ."

"What's famous?" said Challis.

"You really don't know? Conal Cochran? The all-time genius of the practical joke? He invented sticky toilet paper!"

"Oh."

Challis kept an eye on Ellie. She was too preoccupied to be impressed by the displays. Pretending interest, she wandered placidly among cast-iron clockwork animations from the nineteenth century, each ticking to its own inner mechanism. Yet she hung back, waiting to see what Cochran's next move would be.

Little Buddy ran ahead to the end of the room. There a wide glass case protected the most valuable pieces, arranged on velvet pads and lighted as if they were examples of the finest jewelers' art.

Buddy zeroed in on this ultimate display and led Challis to it.

"You *must* know the Dead Dwarf gag? The Soft Chainsaw? All his!"

"Gee," said Challis, "I didn't know . . ."

Buddy took over as if he had been promoted to second in command.

"He manufactured the best Boomer Cushion in the business! Made a great sound!" A flatulent Bronx cheer escaped his lips. "Really loud and convincing. The man has always paid attention to detail. Mechanical toys, masks . . ."

With evangelical zeal he introduced Challis to three superbly repulsive prototypes.

"Look at that paint job. Boy, I'm glad Little Buddy's gettin' a chance to see these—LITTLE BUDDY, BE SURE AND LOOK AT THIS STUFF! S'EDUCATIONAL! It's a real shame Mr. Cochran doesn't make these anymore." He gestured wistfully at the glassed-in joker novelties. "But it wasn't paying off. Took a lot of guts for him to cut his losses and find something with some profit in it."

"The masks?"

"You bet. The Big Halloween Three. Restrict the choices, lower the price, go for quality. Simplify! Saturation advertising. Our ad is on every major radio and TV station in the country. It's incredible!"

Now Challis believed that this man was the company's number-one salesman. *Our ad.* Incredible indeed.

"Yeah," agreed Challis, "it is."

Buddy was determined to convert his new friend.

"You know what? By Halloween night, there'll be fifty million Silver Shamrock masks on fifty million heads out there! That's . . ." He groped for an adequate adjective. "That's unprecedented!" he said as if he had invented the word.

"Fifty *million?"* said Challis.

"Great to be on a winning team, isn't it?"

Join our tribe, thought Challis, *and partake of immortality. Own a piece of the Golden Calf.*

"Yeah," he said.

Ahead, Cochran was escorting Betty Kupfer through another doorway.

Buddy strutted forward with an expanding proprietary interest, one arm protecting his crown prince and heir, Little Buddy.

Challis caught up with Ellie. If she felt as he did, like a spy with

forged papers, she wasn't letting it show.

A more spacious room awaited them.

Old-fashioned hand-blown lighting fixtures spotlighted a green-and-white celebration cake at one end. A devoted staff of assistants in authentic nineteenth-century period dress stood at attention against antique wood-panel walls. As Challis and Ellie ducked in and brought up the rear, the staff applauded.

Cochran held out a ceremonial plaque.

"Buddy Kupfer, it is my pleasure to present you with this year's Silver Shamrock Halloween Sales Award. Congratulations!"

To the applause was added a susurrus of approval.

Buddy was speechless. He took the plaque and held it like a loving cup toward the low ceiling. His wife's compulsive clapping went on and on.

All eyes were on the Kupfers.

Ellie touched Challis's arm.

"I want to have a look in there," she said softly, drawing him backwards.

They were behind a nineteenth-century pipe organ. There was another door, PRIVATE. Before he could refuse, she had opened it.

Behind the door stood a pale, red-haired man in a spotless gray suit. He was staring straight ahead. Like a guard.

"Oops," said Ellie. "My mistake." She gave him her most innocent smile.

Challis rubbernecked around the organ to see whether they had been noticed.

At the far end of the room, near the punch bowl, another graysuit left the ceremony and started toward them.

"Have a nice day," said Ellie, closing the door.

They repositioned themselves for the rest of the festivities.

A flash of light.

Betty wound her Instamatic and handed it to the graysuit by the punch bowl. Spotting Challis and Ellie again, he relaxed. Betty posed next to her husband, the essence of euphoria. The gray suit obliged. There was another flash.

"Oh, and one more thing," Cochran was saying. "A small token of my appreciation." With contrived offhandedness he produced an envelope from his breast pocket.

Buddy accepted it with the aplomb of a game show contestant. He tore into the envelope.

"Five thousand dollars!"

Betty swooned. “Oh my God . . . !” She made preparations to faint.

Cochran rescued her. She planted a red smear on his jowls and broke into tears.

Another round of applause reverberated through the private room.

“I want a mask! Can I have a mask?”

Little Buddy, riding piggyback on the living embodiment of human generosity, Conal Cochran, snatched greedily at the cartons of finished masks.

“Just what I had in mind for you, my young friend!”

Cochran reined in his procession at the shipping center.

Here a score of contented drones toiled over barricades of cardboard boxes, stuffing them with cushioning material before packing the factory’s final production of witches, pumpkins and bone-white skulls. Each box was loaded from storage shelves filled with finished product; the tiers crowded with skulls reminded Challis of bunkers stacked with the remains of concentration camp victims.

“I want *that* one!” demanded Little Buddy. He zoomed his arms toward a new pallet of cooling pumpkin faces.

“Oh, no no no no *no!”* chuckled Cochran indulgently. “These masks haven’t been through final processing yet.”

Without dimming his smile, he gave a hand signal to a tall maskworker in a green smock.

The worker knelt behind a pyramid of cartons and selected a plastic-wrapped jack-o’-lantern mask from the end of the production line.

“Ah, here we are!” said Cochran. He permitted Little Buddy to dismount and formally presented him with the orange headpiece.

The boy’s parents stood by arm in arm, radiating pride.

Cochran unwrapped the mask and installed it over the little boy’s head, taking great pains to adjust it perfectly so that the neck flap with the Silver Shamrock trade seal was positioned exactly at the base of Little Buddy’s skull.

Then Conal Cochran clapped his hands with childlike satisfaction and let the boy go.

“Boo!” exclaimed Little Buddy, running amok with his arms outstretched. His voice was muffled by the rubber, his breathing impaired. But that did not slow him down. “Boo! Boo!”

Buddy Kupfer’s defenseless face was vaguely perplexed. He turned to his wife questioningly. The way he did it told Challis who was really responsible for holding together their optimistic front.

Buddy was awestruck by his new position of privilege, but still insecure about his right to be there. It had happened too fast for him to be sure of the ground rules, and in times of crisis he relied on Betty to keep him from making a fool of himself and blowing a golden opportunity.

“What’s ‘final processing’?” Challis heard him whisper.

Betty maintained her façade of humble delight, but it was apparent that more than a few questions were now nagging at her practical heart. This may have been one of the high-water marks of her marriage, but with each new development she was being drawn more and more out of her depth. She took advantage of her husband’s arm and lifted the weight off one foot for a moment, flexing her toes to relieve at least the burden of standing.

“Don’t ask me,” she said out of the side of her mouth.

CHAPTER
10

Little Buddy ran upstairs.

Outside there was a maze of activity. Yardmen dressed in jumpsuits caught boxes from conveyor belts and topped up the cardboard pyramids which surrounded them like the quarrystones of a monument. As soon as one pallet was filled, a forklift would chug up and carry it away to one of the supply trucks. As a truck maneuvered through the gates just now, a swirl of dust settled over Little Buddy's pumpkin head, powdering his orange rubber disguise like the wings of a great monarch butterfly.

Little Buddy held his head and coughed.

Cochran came up into the yard, laughing jovially.

Challis, Ellie and Little Buddy's parents put their hands in front of their faces to deflect the late afternoon's punishing rays.

"Be careful, honey!" called Betty. "Those men are busy!"

It was useless; Little Buddy made an end run between the workmen's legs, growling frightfully through his mask.

None of them reacted in the slightest.

Little Buddy's macrocephalic pumpkin head slumped forward dejectedly.

Cochran led them past double doors which bore the words NO ADMITTANCE—FINAL PROCESSING. He moved along swiftly, requiring them to keep up.

"Mr. Cochran," said Buddy Senior, "what is this 'final processing'?"

"Oh," crooned Cochran evasively, "a bit o' this and a bit o' that. Snips 'n' snails 'n' puppy dogs' tails. Quality inspection, the seal of approval. You know, the usual. And a couple of trade secrets."

He said it in an intimate voice, to appease Buddy with the impression of confidentiality.

"I'd sure love to see it," said Buddy.

"Sorry."

Challis could not miss the abruptness with which Cochran cut Buddy off.

There was something behind those doors he did not want his visitors to see.

Challis caught up with them.

“Not even a peek for your best salesman?” he asked.

Buddy kept pushing. “How about just a look?”

Cochran ignored Buddy and cocked an eyebrow at Challis.

“Part of the inspection process involves highly volatile chemicals. I’d hate to put anyone in danger.”

Buddy tried valiantly to ignore the slight. “Oh sure,” he said. “I understand.”

Cochran placed a fatherly arm on Kupfer’s shoulders and led him across a loading platform, effectively excluding Challis from the conversation.

“Now I do hope you and your family will join me tomorrow for breakfast,” Cochran was saying. “And we’d like your opinion on some of our sales material in the . . .”

That’s it, thought Challis, a little sugar to help the medicine go down. The man was a pro at manipulation; so much so that he was not used to resistance. The furrow of irritation on his brow had revealed that.

“My opinion?” said Buddy, flattered. “Sure, any time!”

Ellie had been buttonholed by Betty Kupfer. She was okay for the moment. He moved off alone to the edge of the platform and took a good look around the yard.

The grounds were enclosed by a wall and a kind of elevated catwalk railing that ran around the perimeter. His eyes followed the railing to its highest point.

There, on a corner observation scaffold was a man in a three-piece suit. It was instantly clear that he could only be there for one purpose.

Challis scanned the railing to the next corner.

Halfway across, between two buildings, was another graysuit.

Another guard.

They were like towermen in a prison. The only detail missing was any sign of guns.

Based on what one of them had done to Ellie Grimbridge’s father and, probably, to the man under the railroad trestle, they didn’t need weapons.

They did what they had to do with their bare hands.

So far Ellie was unaware that they were being quietly supervised from above, like animals rounded up for the slaughterhouse.

He debated telling her. She had enough to worry about. And it might not be as sinister as it appeared.

But prison security in a rubber-mask factory? Right.

As casually as possible he descended the ramp.

He came up beside the two women and established a friendly but firm grip around Ellie's waist.

"Darling," he said, "I think it's time for us to be going."

Ellie felt the pressure in his hand. She didn't resist.

"See you later!" promised Betty.

Ellie strolled with him.

"Act natural. Everything's going to be okay."

"What's up?" she asked.

"We're getting out."

Challis kept a synthetic smile plastered to his lips.

"I just saw a couple of guys who look strangely familiar. There's another one. Don't look up."

A hundred yards ahead, another graysuit crossed their path and took up a post next to a truck.

"I hate to say this," said Challis, "but they look sort of like the man who killed your father."

She accepted that without argument.

Then, "My God."

He felt her muscles tense.

He saw what she was looking at.

At the front of a hangarlike garage, a steel door was raising to admit a loaded forklift.

"What?"

Past the forklift, in a corner of the garage, there was a car half-concealed by a loose tarpaulin. The rear end of the car, including the license plate, was visible. A station wagon. Green.

Ellie kept walking, but now she was peeling off alone toward the garage.

"Ellie, don't!"

She was nearly there when the graysuits caught up with her.

"The car, damn it! The car is—" She twisted to release her wrists from their grip. She did not succeed.

On the platform, Cochran interrupted his conversation with Buddy and raised a bushy eyebrow.

Challis considered his alternatives.

There were none.

He started toward her, maintaining a confident gait. Don't panic, he told himself. Easy, easy does it . . .

Buddy turned with Cochran.

On the way to join her husband, Betty paused.

Above them all, more graysuits stood at attention.

This was the cutting edge. It could fall either way.

He said a prayer. And kept walking.

Time stood still.

Ellie saw their eyes on her and gave up.

One of the graysuits pointed apologetically to a sign, STRICTLY NO ADMITTANCE. Workmen moved in to lock the steel door.

The graysuits let go.

Eyes watched her, waiting to see what she would do next.

She composed herself and walked back to Challis.

On the platform, Cochran relaxed.

She came up to Challis. One foot placed carefully in front of the other. Her hands were clenched and her nails were digging into her palms, white moons rising on her thumbs.

"I saw it. I know I saw it." Her eyes were sprung wide again and tears of rage were welling there.

He forced her arm to bend through his. He led her away.

"I'm scared," she said. He realized what an admission that was for her. "I—I think we should leave."

He walked her one step at a time. The eyes were at their backs. Another step, another . . .

He smiled for the cameras he knew were on them.

He said, "Then I think it's time for the Marines."

The tour went on awhile longer. They stayed with it.

You can't yell fire, he thought, in a roomful of arsonists.

Shadows were falling over Rafferty's Deluxe by the time they got out.

In the motel room he told her, "All right. You pack. I'm going to call the police. This place falls under somebody's jurisdiction. If that doesn't work, I'll throw it back to our old friend the sheriff."

"I know that license number by heart," she said. "I rode in that car when I was a little girl. I know every scratch, every dent . . ."

"Then you have what we need. Proof."

"Let's get out of here, okay?"

"Okay."

Rafferty was at the gas station, scrubbing down the islands. Challis dodged behind his back and made it to the office.

A television set in the back room was playing a commerical. Challis heard the tune. He covered one ear with the receiver, slugged a coin into the slot and pinched his other ear closed. He dialed zero.

"Operator. May I help you?"

"Operator, this is an emergency. Get me—"

There was a distinct click on the line.

The signal was interrupted.

"I'm sorry, but we cannot complete your call as dialed. Please hang up and dial again. This is a recording."

Challis banged his hand on the phone box. There under his fist was a card with instructions, IF PHONE IS OUT OF ORDER, read the card, PLEASE DIAL THIS NUMBER . . .

"I'm sorry . . ."

"ONE MORE DAY TO HALLOWEEN," sang the voices from the TV, "HALLOWEEN, HALLOWEEN/KEEP YOUR EYES ON THE TV SCREEN/SIL-VER SHAM-ROCK!"

"Operator!"

". . . But we cannot complete your call as dialed . . ."

The tyranny of the machine.

He hung up with savage force.

Time was short. He knew that. His subjective perception of it was racing, gaining momentum and about to spin out of control. Already blue shadows were spreading across the motel lot, about to engulf the cottages under a cape of darkness.

He wanted to run back. But Rafferty was close by. And Rafferty was Cochran's man.

As was everyone else in this town.

He did a slow march back to the cabin. His heart sounded in his ears like a drum beating underwater, counting off the remaining seconds of his allotted time. The shadows were closing in.

At the end of the lot, a late-model car shifted into gear and drove off.

He ignored it and opened the door to Cabin One.

"Ellie?"

No answer.

Her overnight bag was on the bed.

"Ellie!"

He crossed to the bathroom in three steps.

Empty.

He rushed back to the door, flung it open.

Six gaunt Irishmen in gray suits stood in a line outside.

The car was moving out of the lot behind them. The windows of this one were not tinted.

Inside, two slender hands were splayed against the glass as Ellie, black curls flying, opened her face in a silent scream.

The car picked up speed, destined for the factory.

The tallest Irishman came forward. His face was granite and his eyes were cold steel. He raised his hand like a weapon.

Challis leaped back and kicked the door shut.

He bolted it and retreated to the bathroom.

That door wouldn't lock. But there was a window over the tub. It was up partway but wouldn't budge.

He put his forearm under it.

Behind him, the front door ripped off its hinges.

He got his head through the window, his shoulders. He reared with his back and forced it.

As the bathroom door splintered open, he dove through the window and dropped to the ground.

Hands reached for him.

He was gone.

Down the alley. Slippery pools of black water captured the first lights of evening. He splashed through oily rainbows and ran on through mud and ooze, kicking up gravel. He dodged trash and zigzagged to avoid clusters of light.

The street ahead.

The sound of radial tires screeching away from the factory. Coming this way.

Closing in.

At the end of the alley, a car idled in neutral.

It was waiting.

He flattened against the fence.

He heard the car's doors open and close. The motor purring.

He edged backwards.

He felt the last board in the fence.

There was a break in the alley. Another pathway, a tunnel-like passage. Between the houses, to the main street.

The way was tinged with candlelight from pumpkins set out on back windowsills.

One more day to Halloween, he thought.

Even here.

Especially here.

He plunged down the path.

Something else moving. High above him, on the eaves of a frame house. A cat?

No. It was a camera. As he ran past, its servomotor panned with him, tracking him with the deep cherry glow of infrared.

He did not slow until he came to the pavement. *London Bridge is falling down,* he sang in his head, *falling down, falling down* . . .

One more block gone, another. His legs pumped past the dingy stores. All closed. In one doorway, a reddish face watched his passing but made no attempt to interfere. Dead eyes, utterly without compassion. A symbolic sentinel, like a cigar-store Indian. No more than that. Hardly alive.

There. Off the walkway, half-hidden by an awning:

A phone booth.

He couldn't believe it.

He slowed to a walk and, at the last second, disappeared inside.

He closed himself in, rifled his pockets for change. No traffic outside. He could see the street clearly, razor-sharp through the glass. Absolutely no graffiti.

He plugged the last of his coins into the slot. He dialed zero.

Still clear outside.

A busy signal.

He broke the connection.

Think, think!

The coin came back. He shoved it in again and dialed another number. He knew it by heart.

"Please deposit eighty-five cents for the first three minutes."

"For God's sake."

"Please speak up, sir. I can't hear you."

"Operator, this is a matter of life and death!"

"Eighty-five cents for . . ."

He throttled the receiver. "Make it collect," he rasped.

"The name of the party you're calling?"

"Anyone. Whoever answers. I don't have time to—"

"Your name, sir?"

"Daddy."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Dan. Daniel Challis."

"One moment, sir."

Ring.

"Hello?"

"Willie! This is—"

"I have a collect call for anyone from Daniel. Will you accept the charges?"

"It's Daddy, son!"

"Daddy!"

"Will you accept the charges?"

"Huh?"

"Will you . . . ?"

"I wanna talk to my Daddy!"

"He accepts the charges, operator."

"Go ahead, sir."

"Willie, listen to me. You remember those masks your mother . . . ?"

"Daddy, I didn't see you! I . . ."

"Honey, is your mother home? Is Mommy there? I need to talk to Mommy."

"Mom! It's Daddy! He's coming over right now! He says . . ."

"Hello, Dan? Where have you been? The children waited all day yesterday. And today . . ."

"Will you shut the hell up? I'm calling—never mind where I'm calling from. There isn't much time, only one more—"

"You're drunk again. You were drinking yesterday and you've been drinking all day today, and now you . . ."

"Will you shut the fuck up with all that? I'm trying to tell you something! It's about the masks. Silver Shamrock. You have to burn them—no! Don't try to burn them. Throw them away. Take them to the sheriff. Yes, and tell him to get the state police up here—Santa Mira—right now! Do anything, but get them out of the house! *Do it!"*

"Masks? What are you talking about? The ones I bought? Oh sure, I get it. Mommy gives them something, and Daddy tries to take it away. It's the same old crap. It's not enough that you walk out on us, that you stand your children up every—"

"YOU FUCKING BITCH! You fool! You—"

"You're jealous because you know they love me and they don't need you anymore. Well, you can go to hell!"

She hung up.

The phone became silvery. He jerked around as light strafed the booth.

Headlights.

He left the coiled cord dangling as he ducked out of the booth and cloaked himself in shadows.

The receiver swung in a slow arc, the metallic cord stroking like a pendulum.

Until a man in a gray suit stopped at the booth long enough to hang it up.

More graysuits.

They spread out, combing the street in every direction.

From his hiding place, Challis watched them coming. They came on and on.

THE LAST HALLOWEEN

CHAPTER 11

The sun was a red eye on the horizon.

The sky closed over with clouds the color of blood, dark wings massed high over water, preparing for the migration south, tides rose and embraced the dunes, and night came to the cliffs of the California coastline at the end of a long, very long season.

Storefronts were boarded, signs came down, windows were locked and clocks ran faster toward a rapidly approaching winter.

The sun became the eye of a man waiting to die.

Houses flickered with candles as pumpkins carved like skulls were set out as part of an ancient ritual. The sun sank into the sea but was born again as eyes of flame in orange lanterns welcomed in the night.

In Santa Mira, there were other eyes that did not close.

The eyes were black as crows' but alight from within by the deep ruby of infrared. Polished jewels in automated cameras, they scanned the town from hidden mounts like metal cobra heads, sentries of an unsleeping surveillance. Their lidless irises were opened wide, permitting no movement to go unnoticed. Sensors hummed tirelessly, ready to record any approach or escape.

But, like all eyes, each had its blind spot.

Directly under one now, a man crouched in darkness and counted the seconds of its cycle.

When the mechanical eye had passed over, he raised himself and made his break.

An unmarked car cruised out of the factory. Behind the wheel a gray-suited figure was alert to any sign of a runner.

But it was too late.

The man from the shadows had made it to the wall.

Challis waited as the car scudded past like a shark.

Then he hoisted himself over the chain-link fence and dropped inside the grounds.

I could leave, he thought. I could drive away. They left her purse and keys behind. I could go back to the motel and charge out of this

town and not take my foot off the gas till I find the highway patrol. I could do that. Cochran's men might catch up with me, of course. But it would be worth a try.

Except for one thing.

They've got her. And how can you run when you know?

You already have the answer to that one, Danny Boy. You. can't. Not this time. Whatever way it falls, it's got to end right here. There's no time for anything else. Not while they're holding Ellie.

He sprinted the length of the east wall, staying close to the building.

High windows zipped by over his head. He came to a door but it was padlocked. He ran on.

Then:

There. A crack of yellow light. A window that was warped and had not been locked properly. It was open only an inch or two.

But that was enough.

No system is perfect, thought Challis. Not as long as it's designed by the human mind. It's an old story—the oldest. You can chrome-plate everything in sight, but there is always a flaw. Because it was built by flesh and blood.

He pried the window up. It took a minute, but he got it.

He was in.

An empty corridor louvered with shadows. It was lined with hand-rubbed wood and inlaid floors. All too familiar.

An old-fashioned door gave under pressure. He displaced it a fraction of an inch and pressed his eye to the crack.

The maskworks.

Even at this hour, with so little time left, a tall, curly-haired young man in a green smock passed benches with a pushcart, collecting unpainted molds from the tables. No one spoke. It was eerie, to say the least.

He thought, The sun never sets on the sign of the Silver Shamrock. For them it will always be 3:00 A.M. in another endless round of manufactured illusion. At this rate they would soon have the entire world tricked.

He withdrew.

In the middle of the corridor, a stairway.

Without a moment's consideration he went down.

Another unlocked door, a side entrance to the display room. Cochran's inner quarters had to be nearby.

He entered, ignoring the glass-encased masks and collection of clockwork constructions. There was just enough illumination to

highlight their surreal features as he tiptoed through, but there was no time to indulge his imagination now. In fact the medusa mask on the pedestal did appear to shake its head at his progress, the eyes in the snake-hair jarred by the vibration of his footsteps. But he was not about to turn back now.

He found the door marked PRIVATE.

It was the one Ellie had tried that afternoon, beside the pipe organ.

The one behind which a gray-suited guard had been waiting.

He grasped the knob.

His palm was sweating. Around him spring-driven animations ticktocked maddeningly, synchronizing with the pulse in his ears.

He twisted the knob.

It opened without resistance.

An office. The lamps were off, but light was leaking around a partition, edging every detail in luminous bas-relief.

A pretentious desk with blotter and leatherbound chair, a model train track encircling the setting. Toys lay about in various stages of repair. There were early examples of coin-fed machinery, children's musical instruments, an automated one-man band from a turn-of-the-century arcade. He might have been in the attic storeroom of a Victorian house. Except that everything here was meticulously dust-free and perfectly preserved. It was a tinkerer's paradise, an inventor's personal retreat.

Cochran's own sanctum sanctorum, no doubt about it.

From the other side of the partition came a gentle, rhythmic sound.

Challis crossed the room.

There, around the divider in the other half of the office, a green-glass table lamp burned with an undersea glow. A muffled clock was ticking faintly.

Someone was seated at the desk, back to Challis.

A crocheted shawl draped over a high collar of ruched lace. Long white hair pinned back in a bun. The easy locomotion of a rocking chair.

An old woman.

Cochran's mother? Was that possible? She would have to be at least ninety, perhaps older . . .

With a soft snap she flipped over a card from a pasteboard deck.

A game of solitaire.

Her eyes are still good, then, thought Challis.

And her ears?

"Where's the girl?" he said.

Her rounded shoulders did not flinch. Delicate gloved hands flipped another card.

He approached the table and stood behind her. The ticking grew louder.

“Where is she?” he said.

No response.

Then she can’t hear, he thought. But I’ve got to make her understand. She might have seen something.

He reached out and touched her arm.

Another card. *Flip.*

“Listen.” He gripped firmly to get her attention. “Where is . . . ?”

The antique lace sleeve ripped apart in his fingers.

Her arm came off.

He held it in his hand, still covered by the rotten threads of her blouse. In the open shoulder-hole a blued steel spring drove an arrangement of cogs and levers and watchwork wheels. Now the ticking was quite loud. The fingers flexed and unflexed, flipping cards that were no longer there.

The body tipped out of the chair. He grabbed for it.

The head drooped at an impossible angle as the body slid to the floor, and then the head detached completely.

Cards scattered at his feet. He leaned down as the mechanism ceased ticking and lay before him in pieces, a broken doll.

The pasteboard playing card against his shoe was worn but readable. It was the ace of spades.

Another sound. In the other part of the office. He tensed.

Two black gloves caught him around the chest and lifted him from the floor. His feet dangled.

He was whirled around.

The granite face and steely eyes of the tall man in the gray suit, the same one from the motel, stared coldly back.

Challis felt fury. He bared his teeth and slammed his fist into the assassin’s midsection.

The tall man did not react. His eyes glinted humorlessly.

Then Challis was flying through the air.

This is absurd! he thought, a microsecond before he struck the bookcase and flopped to the floor.

The man in gray came after him.

Challis ignored the pain in his ribs and launched himself from the floor in a full tackle.

That took the tall man off his feet. Challis rode him down like an animal.

You felt that, didn't you? he thought savagely. *Didn't you!*

"You son of a bitch!" he choked. "Where is she? What did you—?"

The black glove snapped onto his face.

With sudden lucidity, Challis understood how Grimbridge had been murdered. See? he thought, part of him observing as if it were happening to someone else. The way the fingers spread, going for my eyes, the way the thumb is hooking under . . .

Like a vise. Squeezing, pressing deeper.

The fingers contracted, closing into a claw.

No, thought Challis, with absolute, untouchable calm. *No! Not this way. I will not have it.*

He gathered every ounce of strength he had left. His body arched and became a knotted muscle, his bones hardened, his heart pumped to the limit and the last reserve of adrenaline coursed into his veins. He felt his kidneys ache in readiness as the gloved fingers groped for his eye sockets.

He waited another heartbeat, another, another, stretching it as far as he dared.

It must be timed perfectly. He would have but one blow. It would be his last. But it would contain his whole being.

He freed one arm, raised it high, clenched his fist until it was a rock, and drove it down into the assassin's vest, at the same instant contracting his body in a single spasm of energy.

He struck a soft spot below the ribcage. He had aimed well. He felt the cloth give way, the shirt tear, the flesh sink in and in to receive his hand. A jet of warm wetness sprayed over his arm. He grabbed at the softness inside and twisted, then ripped his hand out.

The claw relaxed.

He dropped out of the grip and rolled free.

He opened his eyes.

He saw a blur of whiteness pumping out of the abdomen, and in his own hand a mass of wires dripping with milky fluid.

It was liquid silicone.

The tall man writhed spasmodically, one arm lashing out, fingers clamping the air. The sharp smell of burning plastic stung the air.

Challis lay there, his chest heaving. His hand felt broken. He let got of the torn wires and tried to stand.

Before he could rise, a door crashed open and more gray-suited guards were on him.

This time there was no way to fight them.

Cochran followed them in.

"Clumsy," he said, going first to the old woman.

He hefted her mechanical head and looked into her face with sadness. He clucked.

"This was a rare piece. German, the best. Made in Munich in 1685. I must try to get a replacement. My European agent, perhaps."

Then, like a host who has been hurt irreparably by the unseemly behavior of a guest, he said, "Mr. Challis. It's been such a long night for all of us."

"Where's Ellie?"

" 'Mrs. Smith'?" Cochran's ire gave way to amusement. "Why, I believe she's resting just now. Yes. Resting."

Challis lunged for him.

Black-gloved hands threw him back to the floor.

Cochran consulted his pocket watch.

"It didn't take you long to get here, Mr. Challis. *Doctor* Challis, I should say. It will be morning soon. Halloween morning. It promises to be a busy day . . ."

He stood over Challis, about to impart some paternal advice.

"Being a medical man, you'll probably find some of it quite interesting."

From the table he lifted an ornamented black box. He flapped its lip open and held it out.

"Do you smoke, Doctor?" He stroked the intricately carved lid of the humidor. "These are the very finest, you can believe me. Bog oak. From the bogs of Ireland."

The yard was a cold gunmetal blue in the morning light.

Throughout the factory grounds work had come to a halt. Truck bodies were jacked apart from cabs, forklifts had been run to ground and abandoned, their lifting bars pointed like spears at the sky.

"Ah, but there's no smoking inside," said Conal Cochran. Regretfully he removed the long cheroot from his mouth and handed it to one of his bodyguards for disposal. "Has to do with dust in the machinery. I very nearly forgot my own rules, what do you say to that?"

Challis had nothing to say as the gray-suited guard crushed out the ember between his flesh-colored fingers and pocketed the remains.

"Now then," said Cochran, "I think everything is in order. This way, please . . ."

Challis was led roughly across the loading platform to a door marked NO ADMITTANCE.

Cochran ceremoniously unlocked it and beckoned his troupe inside.

The way was old and rickety. Except for the yardmen lined up at rigid attention, the interior would have passed for an abandoned warehouse.

" 'Twould be nice to work them around the clock," said Cochran, going to an anteroom. "But alas, the night is bad for them. Rust. And corrosion. The salt air, you know."

"They're all machines," said Challis. "Every one of them."

"Every one but you and me, Doctor. But you figured that out last night, didn't you?"

The graysuits forced Challis down a long flight of stairs.

"The surprising thing is that the internal components are quite simple to produce, really. We get most of them from Korea and Taiwan. The outer features took much longer to perfect, but in the end it's essentially another form of maskmaking."

The stairs fed into a bunker, chilly with fluorescent light. An incongruously modern door slid into the wall, revealing an elevator.

Challis was pressed forward.

Cochran nodded and one of the graysuits pushed a button on the control panel.

"Going down," said a sensuous female voice. It came from the speaker grille above their heads.

The elevator dropped for a very long time. Chains swallowed to unblock his ears.

One of the graysuits sneezed.

"Bless you," said Cochran. His thin lips drew back wryly. "Convincing, aren't they? Loyal and obedient. Unlike most of humankind."

The graysuit released Challis long enough to hand Cochran a set of folded white garments. Then the graysuit began to wrench an identical set of protective clothing over Challis's arms and feet.

"Just like a hospital, eh?" said Challis.

"In a manner of speaking, yes." Cochran dressed himself like a surgeon prepping for the operating room. "I must admit the comparison had escaped me until now."

"And do you save lives here? Marge Guttman, for instance. Did you save her?"

Cochran wagged his head woefully. "Poor Miss Guttman. But death is curiously productive, Dr. Challis. There's a kind of concentration of

the life forces at the moment of truth. The ancient Celts studied it, but couldn't make use of it. Lacked the technology."

"Dust-free area," said the female voice. *"No smoking, please . . ."*

"Would you mind taking off your shoes?" said Cochran. "My men will take good care of them for you." He put on the last of his outer garments and faced forward expectantly.

The elevator thumped to a halt.

At that signal the ceiling panel went red and a ventilation blower whirred on, filtering the air.

Challis noticed the androids on either side of him. In the purifying light their eyes shone blood-red.

"Ellie's father," he said. "You sent one of these out to kill him. Then it destroyed itself. No evidence to lead anyone back here."

Cochran clapped his hands, which were now stained red like everything else in the compartment. The skin around his pink eyes crinkled up. With his snowy hair, he looked like a monstrous white rabbit!

"Very good, Doctor! That Grimbridge, he was a terribly inquisitive man. Downright nosey, you might say."

The red light went out and the doors hissed open. Darkness ahead. Challis was given over into the waiting hands of two more graysuits. Cochran joined them and the door hissed shut behind them.

"Come," said Cochran. "I promised you a look at the whole process, didn't I? My ancestors never dreamed of this . . . !"

Cochran guided them to a dim railing.

Below, on the final level, an immense room the size of a soundstage came into view.

The ringing of hammers reverberated off the high ceiling.

A huge stone megalith several times the height of a man had been erected in one area of the chamber. It rose up from the floor like the primitive gravemarker for an entire nation. Around the base a wooden scaffold with ladders and platforms had been rigged. At the moment a canvas cover of mammoth proportions was draped over the uppermost edge of the rectangular stone. The undraped surface held blue shadows in its coarse, hand-sculpted contours.

"Your ancestors never dreamed of what, Cochran? What is this place?"

"A portion of the Salisbury plain, transported to the New World. Ahh, there we are . . ."

Cochran walked Challis around the railing to afford a view of the other end of the chamber. There a dozen technicians were busy in a

circle of high-intensity tungsten light, making adjustments to a bank of video monitor screens.

“How to explain?” Cochran continued. “It would seem like magic to you. Advanced technology is always magic to one who doesn’t understand it. Rather like your own profession, Doctor, wouldn’t you agree? But come along. You’ve still time to figure it out on your own. Your scientific curiosity will not be disappointed, I assure you.”

They descended to the lowest level.

Now Challis saw a team of workers chipping away at the front of the stone with hammers and precision chisels. Blue-gray chalkiness coated their tunics, their hands.

Their inhuman hands.

“From a prehistoric shrine,” said Cochran reverently. “I imagine even you have heard of it.”

Challis gazed up and up at the monolith and the rain of flintlike chips which were being extracted from the stone. Already a sizable chunk had been carved out, but tons of it were left. Enough to tag every face on earth, even generations yet unborn.

If there would be another generation.

“Stonehenge . . .” murmured Challis.

Cochran picked up a sample chip and smoothed it on his sleeve before returning it cautiously to the conveyor belt. “Devil of a time getting it here. But it had to be done.”

The conveyor belt carried the chips to an assembly area, where hands quick and sure as surgical instruments shaped them and attached them with tweezers and calipers to the backs of Silver Shamrock trade seals.

“It has a power in it, you see. A force. Even the tiniest particle of it can be devastating, given the right circumstances.”

He scooped out a handful of finished seals and inspected them approvingly. He sprinkled them back into the box and applied a jeweler’s loupe to his eye. He picked out a finished skull mask and examined the back of it for the adhesion of its silver nameplate.

“Consider the miniaturization, if nothing else,” he went on proudly. “Those Orientals are simply wonderful with their small hands. Who would have dreamed? As I say, my forebears would have been delighted. To be able to reduce an object to the size of a pinhead. Even their alchemy couldn’t do this.”

“Alchemy, Cochran? Is that what you’re up to?”

“You would call it that. But surely you don’t doubt it now. Not after you’ve seen what it can do.”

“What did it do to Marge Guttman?”

“A magician guards his secrets jealously, Doctor. Don’t all specialists? And a great magus never, but never reveals anything. Soon, of course, it will no longer matter . . .”

They entered the circle of electronic equipment. Cochran motioned a technician away from one of the video screens and made a further adjustment.

“You asked about the girl,” he said casually.

“Where is she?”

The image on the screen stopped rolling and stabilized.

And there was Ellie.

She was lying on a stainless-steel table in an antiseptic, windowless room somewhere in the complex. A figure in a gray suit was close by, tending to her needs. But she was doing nothing. Only staring blankly at the acoustic tiles above her.

Drugged, thought Challis. Or worse.

“Why, she’s right there, Dr. Challis. Quite comfortable, as you can plainly see. At least for the duration.”

He wanted to rip Cochran’s wattled throat out with his bare hands.

“Don’t be afraid,” said Cochran. “Come closer. Talk is cheap, isn’t it? What you really want to see is a demonstration.”

He selected another channel.

“What good timing we’re blessed with! There’s one coming up right now . . .”

With the untroubled capriciousness of a master calling for domestic service, he pressed a button on the console.

CHAPTER

12

“Are you sure about this?” said Betty Kupfer. “There’s nobody here!”

She took Little Buddy by the hand and followed her husband across the office.

One of the graysuits held another door open for her.

TESTING ROOM A.

“Where’s Mr. Cochran?” she asked.

“He *said* eight o’clock,” Buddy reminded her.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” said Little Buddy.

She let go of her son’s hand and accosted the graysuit. “Hey, where *is* everybody?”

The graysuit said nothing.

The door opened not into a laboratory but into a spacious living room. Wordlessly the Kupfers were ushered inside.

Betty relaxed a notch.

The room was a gaily-decorated version of the living quarters found in any typical mail-order catalogue of home furnishings in America. Shag carpeting. A plush sofa upholstered in an extravagant floral design of distinctive taste. An overstuffed chair to match. Color-coordinated drapes of a complementary tropical fruit print. And lemon-yellow walls to boost the spirits of any family gathering.

And, of course, the reassuring eye of a console television set, positioned conveniently for communal after-dinner viewing pleasure.

Both adults were handed pencils, paper and clipboards.

Betty flounced down on the sofa.

Buddy took up the position most familiar to him, which was the easy chair.

Little Buddy explored the room with blasé restlessness, tweaking the lampshade, testing the legs of the end table with a playful kick, handling the plastic knickknacks and kitsch figurines set out to complete the decor.

None of them noticed the graysuit outside, his emotionless eyes noting their responses with perfect impartiality through the chickenwire-glass observation inset in the heavy door.

Buddy was grateful for the momentary comfort. He loosened his

ventilated shoes and took a load off.

"Well, I guess Mr. Cochran will be along," he said resignedly, as he said most everything when no one else was around to hear.

Betty plumped up a decorator pillow and leaned across the virgules of the upholstery. "I don't like those guys," she confided. "They give me the creeps."

She tucked her legs up under her full skirt and draped herself as gracefully as possible against the armrest.

"I have to go to the bathroom!" whined Little Buddy.

He gave up on the model locomotive atop the TV set. He scampered to the door, all the while playing at stamping down the pile of the carpet. It was the latest synthetic blend and bounced back fresh and erect with hardly any lag time. He gave the doorknob an impatient yank.

It would not open.

"Mom-*my!"*

"Relax a minute, willya?" Here in this reassuring setting, Buddy Senior reverted to the role he had practiced to perfection, that of the put-upon breadwinner who is seldom granted a moment's peace. "Mr. Cochran's gonna come and everything will be just fine!"

His hand opened and closed on the floral print armrest as his autonomic nervous system sought a cold one to go with his after-dinner TV.

Betty unsnagged the bra strap under her Butterick blouse. "You think he's going to give you some more money?" She sounded hopeful and dubious in the same breath, not an insignificant feat.

"Naw. He just wants my opinion about some commericals or something."

"I'm bored," declared Little Buddy. He slithered behind the sofa and drew back the curtains.

There was no exit through the mock window, only a ribbed backdrop of gray steel plating.

Buddy sank into reflection. "I still can't figure out why they won't take my orders for next year."

Little Buddy slouched over to the TV set. He twisted the ON control.

It didn't work.

"You know how I like to plan ahead," said Buddy. "It just seems like they're not interested at all."

"Maybe they're not gonna have Halloween next year," suggested Betty.

"Haw haw haw," said Buddy sarcastically. "Very funny." He

checked his watch, re-centered his buttocks with some discomfort on the cushion. “Where *is* he?”

Outside the door, the graysuit received a signal.

He exposed a control panel in the wall and touched a switch.

The TV set popped on.

Little Buddy homed in to a spot on the shag carpet.

The screen snowed over with static, then rolled through a blizzard before locking on a close-up of three ecstatic, apple-cheeked children.

“HAPPY HAPPY HALLOWEEN, HALLOWEEN, HALLOWEEN . . . !”

Buddy picked up his pencil without enthusiasm. He winced. “Aw, this is the same old stuff . . .”

“HAP-PY HAP-PY HAL-LO-WEEN, SIL-VER SHAM-ROCK!”

Betty sat forward. “No, this one’s different.”

“No, it’s not, it’s not . . .”

He rolled his eyes melodramatically as the same Silver Shamrock version of “London Bridge” played out a second chorus. Thus diverted, his eyes were snared by something high in the corner, mounted against the ceiling.

“Look at that,” he said. “A TV camera, by gosh. They don’t leave you alone for a minute, do they?”

“They probably want to get our reactions,” said Betty, primping self-consciously.

“Shh!” said Little Buddy. “I’m listening!”

“Watched a lot of TV in my time,” said Buddy. “But this’ll be the first time it ever watched me . . .”

“TIME! IT’S TIME! ALL THOSE LUCKY KIDS WITH SILVER SHAMROCK MASKS—AND THIS MEANS YOU—GATHER ’ROUND!”

“Don’t get too close,” Betty said to her son. “You’ll ruin your eyes, honey.”

But the boy was shaking out his Silver Shamrock pumpkin and dragging it on over his head. He stretched the nose and found the eye holes.

The announcer’s Irish brogue chanted on.

“AND NOW, WATCH THE MAGIC PUMPKIN! *WATCH!*”

The screen was taken up corner-to-corner by a vivid two-dimensional pumpkin graphic. Electric orange against a neutral background. Extreme close-up, with broad sawtooth mouth and triangular eyes.

There was a high-voltage crackle in the back of the set as the screen went black.

Not blank. *Black.*

“Now what is this?” said Buddy. “They screwed up the commercial.”

The pumpkin flashed back on the screen.

Then black.

Then the pumpkin.

“I think this whole thing is a big joke,” said Betty.

The flashing alternated faster and faster so that the pumpkin’s afterimage remained while the background changed. Black through the eye holes, then white. Black, white. The pumpkin shimmered and seemed to lift off the screen.

As the room strobed with bright and dark frames, Little Buddy’s hands crept up to his mask.

“Little Buddy?” said Betty.

The stroboscopic effect speeded up until the room was blazing under a machine-gun assault of orange phosphor.

The shamrock button on the back of Little Buddy’s mask became activated.

It glowed red-hot.

The boy lurched back from the set, clutching the mask. A strangled moan came from beneath the mouth holes as he attempted to remove it.

“Little Buddy!”

Betty stood up in shock as the boy pitched forward headfirst onto the carpet.

Little Buddy kicked and tried to raise himself.

His pumpkin head melted.

The orange rubber wrinkled and ran like dissolving flesh, uncovering his eyes. They were two blood-red orbs.

His parents were both on their feet.

But it was too late.

The mask hole which was his mouth tore open in a rictus.

A wiry appendage poked forth. Covered with bristles. It hooked to the carpet and pulled another appendage out after it.

Another. And another.

It was a spider the size of a black hand.

Betty released a half-scream, half-whimper and fell upon her son.

The spider sprang to her face.

She shrieked in horror as it stung her again and again.

Buddy had to do something. He dove down onto his wife, covering her. But already she was twitching into paralysis.

Then, out of Little Buddy's throat came the writhing extension of something long and impossibly thick, sheathed in slime, like a swollen, blackened tongue.

A snake.

As it forked the air and unveiled its dripping fangs, Buddy inserted his arms under his son in an attempt to turn him over, to lift him away. But the fangs sank deep into his leg, cutting through his trousers and burying their needle-sharp injections to the bone.

His legs numbed and collapsed under him.

Little Buddy fell back, mask and face crumbling as one into the discoloring carpet.

Like a cripple Buddy tried to stand. He could not. He confronted the camera in the corner, tears streaming down his face.

"Damn you, Cochran! Liar! Murderer! Damn you to hell! *Damn you . . .!*"

He was pulled down with the rest of his family.

As the defiled head of his only son opened like the doorway to another dimension and spewed forth darkness and decay.

Buddy Kupfer wept impotently, pounding his fist into the carpet which now crawled with the unspeakable malformations of nature's underside. His fist rose in a last spastic gesture of defiance as his physical body and the family he had created, the substance of his life and the world of his choice, all he had lived and worked for and the only dream he had ever known degenerated before his eyes into a churning, formless mass of unleashed chaos.

Then there was only the sound of two long, pale hands clapping.

Conal Cochran clasped his manicured hands to his breast and said with quavering voice, "Lovely! Lovely! Doesn't it simply surpass one's wildest dreams?"

Challis could no longer look at the screen. His eyes blurred and a terrible agony clutched his heart.

"Children," said Challis, his words slurring. "All the children . . ."

"Yes," hissed Cochran, "the children! A plague is on them. Now think of that—in fifty million homes!"

"Sacrifices," said Challis. His cheeks were burning and his body quaked. Strong black-gloved hands restrained him. "To what pagan god, Cochran? For what purpose?"

"God? What a quaint word! I am speaking to you of our way, the one way, the old way, as it was done long before your unshorn carpenter from Galilee chose to destroy himself on that rude cross. Do

you know anything about Halloween, Doctor?"

"I do now," said Challis. His arms nearly broke as he strained forward.

"Tsk, tsk, my good man! Ignorance is such a convenient excuse for self-righteousness. No, of course you don't know. How could you? You've thought no further than that strange custom of letting your children dress themselves in morbid costumes and go begging for handouts."

He extended his arms to give audience to the entire chamber. As if the technicians and graysuits could hear and understand his words. But he had not bothered to program them for such a function. He was himself his own best audience.

Now he spoke to the far reaches of the hall, to the prehistoric stone monolith rather than to its custodial minions, who continued their chipping, multiplying the icon to spread its body across the land.

"It was the start of the new year in our old Celtic lands. We would wait in our houses made of turf. The barriers were down, you see, between the real and the unreal. The dead might look in, sit by our bit of fire. It was our glorious festival of Samhain. The last great one was three thousand years ago . . ."

His eyes glazed with rapture, mirroring some previously unspoken memory. He continued in a faraway voice.

"The hills ran with the blood of countless animals . . . and countless children . . ."

"I don't want to hear this," said Challis.

"Oh, but you really should. It was part of our world, our craft."

"Witchcraft!"

"Your term. To us it was a way of controlling our world. The only way. As it is once again."

Cochran glowered at the television equipment, the high-tech products which surrounded him.

"All this has failed you and your kind, hasn't it, Doctor? You can't predict with certainty any event in your world, not even the rudimentary workings of your own bodies. Isn't that so?"

"We try," said Challis. "We're getting better at it all the time."

"But will time wait for you? I think not. Even my ancestors were left behind by the machinations of history. They had the power. But they lacked one ingredient: the harnessing and storing of that power. Which, ironically, is what you and yours have now provided.

"Times have not really changed, my friend. The quest for control remains a constant. And now it's time again. In the end, we don't decide these things, you know. We are but a part of the great plan.

Today the planets are in alignment, the moon is in syzygy, and it's time. That's all."

Cochran snapped his fingers. A gray suit held out three masks.

"Which one? Ah, I think *this* one will suit you perfectly. It becomes you. It *will* become you, you know."

He selected the painted skull and pulled it over Challis's head like a hood.

"Tell me one thing first," said Challis. "Why *children?"*

"Do I need a reason? Oh, I could tell you that they are the easiest prey—and they are, you know. People nowadays no longer listen to them. They provide the easiest entry, the path of least resistance. What better reason, from a purely pragmatic view? But they *are* such irritating little creatures, don't you agree? You know that you do, deep down. They are as noisy as wretched sheep and twice as dirty, given to us from out of the filthiest part of woman. And you know what happens to dirty little lambs, don't you, Doctor? They are invariably given over to the slaughter."

"I want to see Ellie."

Cochran jerked the mask down. He laughed crookedly. "Oh, you will, Doctor, I promise you, you will!"

He lowered the mask all the way and snapped his fingers again.

"Take him away."

* * *

It was a small room. Not unlike the examination cubicle adjoining his own office at the hospital. Except that this one had soundproofed walls and a door that locked from the outside.

Challis sat strapped down, his feet bound at the ankles and his hands taped to the arms of the chair, which was bolted to the floor. There was only one other object in the room. A television set.

Before him on the screen was the image of a young woman with dark, disheveled curls and burned-out eyes. She was sitting on the floor in a concrete-walled corner, with indirect light playing down on her from above.

Challis breathed rapidly, sucking the mask to his face.

"Ellie . . . !" he said, his breath condensing.

Then, at the edge of the frame, the tall, immaculately outfitted figure of Conal Cochran appeared with his hands folded at his back.

Ellie greeted him weakly. "Hello, Daddy."

"Hello, Ellie," said Cochran. "Been a good girl, have you?"

"Yes, Daddy. I just played."

"Good! Very, very good. And now here's something I've brought for you. A special present for such a good girl."

He unclasped his hands from behind his back.

He was holding a rubber witch's mask.

"What do you say?"

"Oh. Th-thank you, Daddy."

"That's better."

Challis fought his bonds but it was no use. The graysuits had done their job. The mask threatened to smother him. When he raised his head again and found the holes, Ellie was alone in the ring of light, the agape witch's face resting innocuously in her lap.

He heard a scraping of metal on metal. It was magnified enormously by the walls.

A door in his steel room opened, and Conal Cochran let himself in.

"What have you done to her?"

"See for yourself." Cochran gestured with his wrist at the screen.

Challis was overcome by a desire to be with her, to be there with her, to go all the way down and be there so that he might make it as easy, as painless for her as possible at the end.

Cochran seemed to read his mind. He towered over Challis like a straight-backed headmaster.

"Even if I were to let you say your good-byes, she wouldn't know you. You've lost her, Daniel. Ellie is six years old, now and forevermore—for as long as is left to her. Such a lovely and wretched age, six. Wouldn't you agree? I've made her just the way I want her. The perfect age for a victim."

He placed a hand on the television controls.

"She does have a strong face. Good bones. The wrong coloring, of course. But we could fix that."

He winked over his shoulder at Challis.

"Of course, were I to use her, by the time her face reached the toy stores of Europe her features would be unrecognizable. Even her best friends won't know her then."

He rested his index finger on his lower lip and considered the dial.

"But let's change the channel, shall we? Unless you've any further questions. I do have a few last-minute preparations. Minor technical adjustments, a phone call or two. I wouldn't want the heads of broadcasting to miss the big night! After all, we've projected a forty-three share. All those greedy little hands reaching up for something their pathetic parents can't provide! I've bought two minutes of very special screen time at all three networks. That should be more than

enough . . .”

Challis found the mouth hole in his skull mask and spoke. His voice came back to him as through cotton. He tried again, shaping his lips around the word with greater care than he had ever taken with any other word in his life.

“Why?”

Cochran reset the selector to the commercial mode and tuned the picture with his tapered fingers.

“Mischief, Dr. Challis,” he said briskly. “Mr. Kupfer was right on at least one point. I do love a good joke. The jokers are the great men of history. It’s what we do best. It rules the world. And when we finally transform it into our own image—and we will—that’ll be the biggest joke ever!”

He sorted through his keys and let himself out.

“The world is going to change tonight, Dr. Challis. I’m glad you’ll be a witness. Only a few more hours. Enjoy the Horrorthon. Don’t forget to watch the Big Giveaway afterwards.

“And . . . *Happy Halloween!”*

CHAPTER

13

A skeleton. A witch. A pumpkin.

The three figures floated down a tree-lined residential street, oblivious to the cars that passed them by. An autumn wind rustled the oaks and a flurry of gravyboat leaves coasted down at their feet. Already the sun was slanting low through the branches and a few jack-o'-lanterns, silent watchmen of the coming night, burned orange beacons in the otherwise drab windows and porches of this quiet suburban block.

The words MUNCIE, INDIANA appeared at the lower border of the screen.

"IT'S HALLOWEEN TONIGHT, KIDS!" said a breathless announcer. "GET YOUR SILVER SHAMROCK MASK NOW!"

A row of masks in a toy store, balanced on their necks like helmets of a secret army.

Small hands darted out and plucked one after another from its pedestal as a cash register rang up more sales.

The children donned their masks and ran out of the store.

BOWLING GREEN, KENTUCKY.

"IT'S HALLOWEEN TONIGHT, KIDS! GET YOUR SILVER SHAMROCK MASKS AND WATCH THE BIG HALLOWEEN HORRORTHON!"

A tank-sized delivery truck bearing the sign of the shamrock negotiated a rustic corner, SOUTH AMERICAN STREET, read a sign.

STOCKTON, CALIFORNIA.

"TONIGHT'S THE BIG NIGHT, KIDS! WATCH THE HORRORTHON WITH YOUR SILVER SHAMROCK MASKS! AND BE IN FRONT OF YOUR TELEVISION SETS AT NINE O'CLOCK, NO MATTER WHAT!"

PHOENIX, ARIZONA.

DAYTON, OHIO.

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA . . .

"NO MORE DAYS TO HALLOWEEN, HALLOWEEN, HALLOWEEN . . . NO MORE DAYS TO HAL-LO-WEEN, SIL-VER SHAM-ROCK!"

The three dancing faces faded out in a flourish of trumpets.

Challis dropped his chin to his chest to block out the pictures.

In front of him was a TV monitor. Its sound would not go off, its maximally-adjusted screen recreating images so vivid they seemed to penetrate the overhanging brow of his skull mask and even the eyelids, his eyelids, which were no longer under his control.

Nothing else in the room moved.

Only his hands, working feverishly at the reinforced strapping that bound them.

Now, however, there was a new sound: a mechanical buzzing. It came from the wall, as if an insect were trapped within the soundproofing panels. The buzzing continued.

It was the sound of a fan exchanging air in the room.

How considerate of Cochran, he thought. He wouldn't want me to die of asphyxiation. That would be too prosaic.

And premature.

He wore away at his bonds.

But the graysuits, perfect machines that they were, had done their duty without a slip. His fingers cooled and became thick and dull as his straining cut off the pulse at his wrists.

He eased up and sensation returned, his hands prickling with pins and needles as the flow of blood was restored to his veins.

The sound of a young woman's scream blasted from the TV, assaulting his ears, as the movie resumed.

He refused to let the pictures in. But the voice was strong and persistent, striving for control and yet dangerously near the edge.

It reminded him of Ellie.

Now he saw her face before his mind's eye, tender and vulnerable and, in its way, indomitable. He saw her face close to his own, nearly touching, her eyelashes brushing his cheek, then turned away and buried in his chest. He was combing his fingers through her hair, her dark, fragrant curls . . .

The memories were intercut with the gray, washed-out face Cochran had shown him on the monitor a few minutes or hours ago. The face of a subdued child who had been drugged and regressed to some point in a long-forgotten past before she had learned not to be afraid of the dark.

For the moment he gave up.

Then he remembered how few moments more there were left to him. And to Ellie. And to the rest of the country. And to his children. And to his children's children, generations yet to come.

He shook his head and arched his back.

Agnes, he thought, drifting, where are you when I need you?

Good, kind Agnes, who believed with a faith she had never seen verified by empirical evidence, who had ignored her own discomfort for so long that she had ceased to be conscious of it, until it no longer mattered. Did she do it for the promise of some amorphous reward in the Great Beyond, the mere existence of which was denied by every aspect of her profession? No. She did it to save lives. Which was another way of saying she did it for her soul. For her own kind. For all of them.

For all of us.

And, so believing, nothing could stand up in her way.

She did it because they needed her, because she needed them, because they needed her, because she needed them.

And so the circle of self-perpetuating life continued. Hardly powered by the Stone relics of a doomed past. But a living energy that dwells in all that breathes.

He did not hear the screaming so loudly now. It faded away like the momentary diversion that it was.

There are only two screams worth heeding, he decided. The scream that ushers in the beginning of life. And the scream that ends it. All the others in between are useless indulgences.

And so he again took up the fight.

His muscles renewed. His chest expanded and his legs swelled against his ankle bindings. He scrunched down in the chair, but that gave him no slack; it merely served to draw his bonds tauter. The keys in his trouser pocket dug a circle into his flesh.

Keys? He had no keys. His own keys were in his jacket, which had been stripped off him as soon as he was caught.

A circle?

Something round against his leg. In his pocket.

A quarter? Thicker. It had sharp edges and cut into him when he moved.

Then he remembered.

It was the chip. The round Silver Shamrock seal. The one that had come off the mask in Marge Guttman's room. He had picked it up and put it in his pocket.

The idea of that bloody wafer against his body repelled and sickened him. The Silver Shamrock badge at the back of his neck, of course, embedded in the skull mask on his head, was already in place. But at least that one was for his own death, his own failure and no one else's. If it came to that. But the one in his pocket had already served its purpose. It had done its work. It had done enough.

He bent his hand back to the point where it almost dislocated from

his wrist. Then, starting with his little finger, he burrowed his hand down into his side pocket. It took several minutes.

The nightmare of violence and destruction that was the Horrorthon played out in front of him, only a few feet away. It meant nothing to him. It was about as relevant now as a cartoon is to reality.

Meanwhile, the token in his pocket became a focus for his anger and hatred.

There. Two of his fingers closed around its engraved surface. He read the grooves of microcircuitry, the stone chip backing with his fingertips. If he closed his eyes the weight of the button seemed to conjure visions of needless suffering, the legacy of stone that was its origin. It wore his skin raw.

You can go to hell, he thought, you miserable, perverted piece of technological shit. You've earned it. Just get the hell away from me. You and everything you stand for.

He snapped the stone symbol as far away from him as his wrist would allow.

Like a bottlecap, it sailed through the air in a low, spinning curve, until it struck the face of the television picture tube.

Inside the room there was a blinding flash.

The explosion knocked him back and then he was falling, toppling backwards until his head met the tiles. Bolts groaned. Wood splintered.

The chair tore loose from the floor.

I'll be damned, he thought.

And you, too, Cochran, By God. I promise you that.

Through the folds of the rubber mask he saw the imploded television set, a smoking hole where a few seconds ago Cochran's maniacal Horrorthon had been playing. He saw the shards of glass sticking out of the cabinet, blown out across the floor.

Very, very sharp pieces of glass.

Like knives.

Crawling toward one, inching his way painfully, dragging the chair behind him, a new emotion guided his moves.

I'm not dead, Cochran, he thought, bucking up against a razor-sharp fragment. And I'm not going to be dead when the clock strikes eight or nine or whatever unholy hour you've set all your efforts toward. And with God's help, and maybe a little of my own, neither will anyone else.

The glass cut the tape on his wrists as cleanly as a blade.

He sized up the room.

The chair. The glass. The demolished TV.

He had been mistaken about one thing. There was another object in the room with him. There it was up in its corner, its turret angled like a praying mantis.

A TV camera.

With one quick, continuous move, he ripped the mask from his head and lobbed it like a Frisbee at the corner. It landed on the camera, covering the lens with a nodding skull-face.

That would give him another minute. One more precious minute.

He noticed the charred Silver Shamrock seal lying inert again on the floor.

That's the trouble with evil, Cochran, he thought. It plays no favorites. And it respects no one. Well, we may all be living under a sentence of death; we are born into it; that is our fallen lot. But we don't have to embrace it until the last vital taste of life has turned to dust in our mouths.

There are those whose job it is to make what's left as free of pain and suffering as possible. And I am one of them.

Slashing away at his leg bonds, Challis set his face in a bold, determined grin.

He had come a long way, but it was worth it. He had avoided it down the nights and the years. But at last he had found it again.

He had a purpose.

And he was alive.

He freed himself, righted the chair and stretched up to tear the cover off the air-conditioning duct in the wall.

Wedged into the cramped ventilation duct, Challis heard a familiar voice.

He crawled on.

The voice was stronger as the gridlines of another air-conditioning panel checkered the tunnel ahead. He elbowed to it.

Light and shadow. A hundred feet away and thirty feet below, Old Man Cochran was rocking in a contour chair, telephone in hand, enveloped by an array of video monitors and patch panels.

"Ahh, thank you," the snowy-haired man was saying into the phone. "And it's a pleasure doing business with you, too, so it is! A forty-*seven* share, you think? How delightful! . . . Good! Hope the little ones will be watching. And don't forget the Big Giveaway at nine! You and your lovely wife should watch, too!"

A technician detached himself from his post in front of the monitors

and interrupted with a click of his heels.

"Sir?"

"Yes, yes, I will. Thank you again." Cochran finished his call and acknowledged the technician.

"Yes?"

"Malfunction. Camera Seven."

"What?"

"We've lost him."

Cochran punched up a rapid-fire montage of surveillance views on his monitor.

"Not at all," he said, unperturbed. "You'll see."

He turned the control board over to the technician. Then he made another call.

"Cochran here," he said. "Is everything ready in New York? Yes, we're as ready here as we could possibly be! We've sold nearly one hundred fifty million masks. It's quite phenomenal . . . No, not a sales tool, really. Tonight's just for fun. A sort of 'thank you' to all our good customers . . ."

Cochran smiled smugly and rocked, as the technician scanned one corridor after another on the monitor.

Challis kept crawling.

You poor damn dumb bastard, he thought. You've got your electronic wet dream all laid out, haven't you? It's perfect, as perfect as any mechanical projection of human intelligence can be.

Good luck. You'll need it. You forgot one thing. This place. The factory was here before you took it over, built not by security machines but by some poor slob years before television was invented. Like any other human being, he was just one more designer of the mothproof closet within which dwells the moth. Why, he didn't even bother to cement the soft aluminum ventilation screen into place. He probably installed every one in this entire building the same way.

Tsk, tsk.

Cochran, you stupid shit, thought Challis. Nothing can outsmart you. Except that fragile bowl of quivering jelly called the brain. And that's the "flaw" that's going to bring it all down around you . . .

He came to a junction in the duct.

Two ways to go. Needles of light fell across his hands in a pockmark pattern. He raised his face.

A perforated panel above him.

He wormed his way up to it.

A gentle push was all it took.

He emerged onto the roof of the factory under a blanket of low clouds. The air was frigid and gusting across the tarred shingles.

Like a tightrope walker, he made his way to the edge.

He heard a whirring.

Mounted near the rain gutter, a revolving camera.

He stooped under it, duck-walked to an old fire ladder and scuttled down to a secondary roof. Another ladder, a frontage wall . . .

A forgotten access door.

One kick and he was back in.

He dropped down into a corridor stacked with an obstacle course of shipping crates.

The crates, however, provided excellent cover for the passing eyes of two graysuits on patrol.

It took him a while longer to find Ellie.

The graysuit outside her room went into a sputtering death-dance at the first surprising thrust to its soft spot. The same spot, where the diaphragm would be in a human being, an inch or two below the center of the ribcage. Challis remembered well his newest anatomy lesson.

He got the guard's keys and went in.

Ellie didn't know him. But she was too drugged to refuse. He had to lead her out of the concrete room as if she were a mental defective.

After he had ripped out the coaxial cable to the camera, of course.

There were footsteps nearby. A lot of footsteps. Growing louder, coming this way. The corridor was short, with tight turns at either end. The echoes made it impossible to be sure.

Halfway down, the elevator.

And, a few yards on, a fire stairwell.

IN CASE OF FIRE OR OTHER NATURAL DISASTER, warned the sign, USE STAIRS NOT ELEVATOR.

Okay, thought Challis, you got it.

He took her hand. Her cold hand.

"Run," he told her. "Run with me. *Now.*"

She was barefooted but she didn't complain. She was feeling no pain.

After a lengthy descent, they came out on the catwalk above the high-tech area.

At first the only thing he saw was the slab, towering in the worklights like a grandiose tombstone in full moonlight. The color of it was that of a human face in the terminal seconds of oxygen deprivation. To see that moribund color on such a sheer mass of

surface area made his throat knot up. He led her around it.

"Ready with the final test run, sir," said a technician.

"Superb," said Cochran, clapping his hands.

They were relatively safe. No one had been programmed to look up.

They edged past a tall pyramid of packing cartons at the top of a motionless conveyor belt. Challis peeked into one. Mask components.

He kept moving.

Behind him, Ellie said, *"Daddy?"*

"No!" he whispered. "Ellie, come—"

It was too late.

On the floor below, everything stopped.

Eyes lifted, Cochran's and many others.

The old man pushed himself up from his chair.

"Why, hello, Ellie!" he said.

He snapped his fingers. A spotlight located her at once.

She was standing on the tongue of the conveyor belt, a cardboard box in her arms.

"Daddy?" she called down. "Can I?"

"Of course you can, my dear," said Cochran. His words rebounded off the sounding board of the stone. "Come to me, Ellie! Come to me . . ."

Graysuits were ascending the catwalk stairs at either end.

Cochran snapped his fingers again. They stopped in mid-climb.

"Come to me now," he said. "JUMP!"

Challis swung to the outside of the railing and shimmied toward her. He held out his hand..."Ellie, don't listen to him. Ellie . . . !"

"Come along now, child," said Cochran impatiently. He opened his arms to receive her. "Come to Papa. Papa will catch you. *Jump now."*

Ellie wavered high above the bright center of light.

She took a deep breath. She chewed the inside of her mouth.

"No, Daddy!" she said. "You don't understand. Daddy . . . can I let him go?"

Cochran hesitated, baffled but entertained. "Now, now," he said, "that's quite enough foolishness for one night . . ."

"Can I let the little bird go?"

"Yes, yes, of course," said Cochran.

Around him the eight TV monitors went black, then began to flash with the final commercial test.

"TIME!" boomed the taped announcer's voice. "IT'S TIME! ALL

THOSE LUCKY KIDS WITH SILVER SHAMROCK TOYS, HOLD THEM UP! CLOSE TO THE SCREEN! CLOSE TO ME . . . !"

The camera zoomed in and eight orange pumpkin heads began to strobe in close-up. Faster and faster.

Ellie reached into the box she was holding. She withdrew a small object.

A tiny trefoil the size of a quarter. The Silver Shamrock trade seal.

"Tweet . . . tweet," said Ellie.

She flung the silver logo into the air. It arced out and down, striking the floor near Cochran's polished shoes.

It sparked up in a miniature explosion.

Startled, Cochran danced a step.

"What . . . ?" he cried.

"Daddy?" said Ellie. "The others, too! Tweet . . . tweet!"

She scooped her hand into the box again and again, hurling whole handfuls of the logos down like silver rain.

Sparks zipped across the spaces like tracer fire as one screen after another was struck and exploded.

Bursts of blue smoke erupted in the midst of the technicians. Their bodies instantly short-circuited and split open in fountains of squirting silicone.

Challis reached her.

"Yes," he said, "yes! *Do it!"*

He hurled handful after handful with her at the war zone below. Fireworks ignited the air.

He took the box from her and upended it, scattering the contents.

"Tweet . . . tweet . . . tweet!" said Ellie.

High voltage cut through the smoke as lightning riddled the artificial storm.

Cochran stood in the middle of it, staring up with an expression that was close to admiration.

Now there was a mighty rumbling.

Something was happening to the rock. A quaking roar emanated from it, thunder from the mountain.

Opposite the stone, the monitors that had not yet exploded strobed in unison until they were joined together by a blinding beam of white light.

The light zapped across to the rock.

The tarp fell away and the chipped face began to glow white-hot.

Bathed in the white light, Cochran turned his eyes again to Challis

and the girl. Now he was smiling unashamedly.

He unclenched his tapered fingers and applauded madly.

A fissure appeared in the rock as fracture lines lengthened.

The rumbling became an earth-shattering howl that shook the building to its foundations.

Challis yanked Ellie to safety as the rock split wide and a giant arc of pure energy jumped the distance to the monitors in a long, searing bolt of chain lightning.

The lightning passed through Cochran's chest, skewering him as he stood there in the center of a white fireball brighter than the sun.

He began to glow with an unbearable brilliance, impaled in the eye of an energy cyclone . . .

As Challis half-dragged, half-carried Ellie up the stairs and out of the blazing factory, a sound like the horrible, laughing wail of a banshee escaped into the sky and rushed out over the world.

Then there were only the explosions as the center of Santa Mira became a pillar of fire pointing through the clouds.

He lifted Ellie's limp body in his arms and ran from the conflagration, shielding her so that she would not have to see.

Epilogue

Challis drove Ellie's Cutlass like a madman.

As they sped away from the motel and up the access road, the town behind fluttered into incandescence, then shrank to a tiny point in the rearview mirror, a single glowing eye receding rapidly away down a tunnel, and gone.

Ellie lolled on the seat next to him.

It was curious, the way a great calm was overtaking him with each mile he put between himself and Santa Mira. He was returning to the real world, rushing headlong into it and all that it meant—they both were—and that only served to galvanize his sense of purpose. Whatever it held for him, he was ready now. It might take a bit longer for Ellie, but she would make it.

In one sense it was over.

But in another sense it would never be.

Cochran was nothing new, whatever his latest disguise. He and the dark forces he represented had been around in one form or another since the beginning of time; there was no good reason to believe something so ancient had really been destroyed in a blaze of fireworks in a small town on a cold autumn night.

This year's dark venture was like a rerun on the Late, Late, Very Late Show, an endless loop re-enacting the last reels of the same relentless stalking of the heart of the American dream.

It had always been so.

Variations of figures like Cochran had come again and again to towns like this all across the country and the world, and would continue to come in endless variety and profusion whenever the days grew short and the true horror of an unburied past returned to haunt the long night of the human soul. He would come to movie theaters and TV screens over and over in untiring replays for as long as people turned away and pretended he was not really there; for that very refusal gave him unopposed entrance to their innermost lives.

Nothing ever stopped his coming and nothing ever would stop it, not for as long as people deferred the issue of his existence to the realm of fantasy fiction, that elaborate system of popular mythology which provided the essence of his access . . .

For now, he was still advancing, merely shifting from one field of view to another, larger one, from a single television screen to the

televised psyches of a nation.

Challis shuddered.

He may not win in the end, thought Challis, and this may be only one round. But it's an important one; it matters.

He floored the accelerator and barreled down the road.

Phantom trees shunted past the car, an occasional renegade branch reaching out to swipe at the fender, then slipping back to rejoin the waving darkness. The tiny agate eyes of countless small animals that only come out at night shone back from stunted scrub and half-seen ditches; once the headlights clipped an opossum or overgrown rat, he could not tell which, lumbering across the white line, the nude antenna of its tail sprung high in the air. It froze like a shooting-gallery target halfway across the road, struck blind by the high beams. Challis hit the horn with the heel of his hand and swerved before it scurried to safety on the other side.

He passed it and bore down the line.

As they swung around a curve, Ellie straightened in the seat.

Her eyes stared ahead, not at the road but somewhere beyond the immediate landscape, at the scene they had left behind or at the larger reality that lay before them.

Or perhaps she was seeing none of it, nothing at all.

For now, it would be easier for her that way.

"Take it easy," he said, unable to do more for her at this moment. "Try to rest. You ought to rest."

She did not answer.

"Ellie? Can you hear me?"

Probably not, he thought. And just as well. He had seen the reaction before. It was a special healing grace, this withdrawal. Like down-time on an overloaded computer. Time to process the nightmares so that they don't take over when the sun comes up again.

He reached over and pressed her hand.

It was still cold.

He flicked on the radio.

". . . EXPECTING OVERCAST SKIES AND A FIFTY-PERCENT CHANCE OF RAIN THROUGH TOMORROW. IT'S PRESENTLY SEVENTY-FOUR DEGREES AT SEVEN TWENTY-EIGHT P.M. HERE ON YOUR MIGHTY KAB. THIS IS STEV—"

He jammed the selector button to another station.

I'll make it in time, he thought. I have to. Don't think about the alternatives.

The tail end of an overwrought piece of music blipped by, a

country-and-western tune about too little love or too much, too soon or too late, in the wrong place or nowhere at all. He ignored it but let it play. It was soothing in its way, a first step toward turning the familiar world back on again.

"IT'S ALMOST TIME FOR HALLOWEEN, HALLOWEEN, HALLOWEEN . . . TAKE YOUR MASK TO THE TV SCREEN, TV SCREEN, TV SCREEN . . ."

He began to tremble, his hands dragging on the wheel.

He twisted the radio off and regained control.

The clock on the dashboard read 7:30.

Just a few more miles, he told himself, grinding his teeth down to bare nerves. We're almost far enough away to be able to call for help to people who will listen. And they will. They will. *They've got to* . . .

He said it over and over to himself like a litany until he was able to hold himself together again.

"Ellie, are you all right?"

She leaned her head against his shoulder as they jolted around a curve.

He held her leg through the jeans.

"That's right," he said, "rest. We'll be there soon." Wherever "there" is, he thought. If only I could see a map.

But we can't be that far away from civilization.

Another turn.

Her hand flopped into his lap.

He touched her fingers. Still cold, he thought. All those drugs Cochran must have shot her up with; her metabolism's so low her skin's like ice.

He put his arm around her and drove with one hand.

Her hand crept up to his shirtfront.

He was relieved. For a second there . . .

But he put it out of his mind. Tried to put it out of his mind.

She had been so withdrawn, so lifeless after he had put her in the car. It had taken only a half-minute to kick in the door to Cabin One; but of course her things, including the keys, weren't there. He had had to lift the hood and hot-wire the starter to get going. In that short time it seemed that he had lost her completely. She had been sitting round-shouldered, like a broken doll, as if all the life had gone out of her . . .

But she was all right now. Getting better, at least. He could feel it. Already her fingernails were picking at the buttons of his shirt.

Her hand moved up to his neck, the backs of her fingers caressing his cheek.

He took hold of her fingers and kissed them.

The first suggestion of lights far ahead, through the trees.

"Honey," he asked, "does any of this look . . . ?"

She doesn't remember. But that's all right. Neither do I.

As soon as I get to a real phone, he thought, it's all over for those jokers. I'll pull the plug on them like they wouldn't believe; I'll blow the goddamned whistle so long and so loud . . .

Her fingertips traced his lips.

He was aware of her head turning, her eyes on him.

Her fingers were so cold.

"Ellie?" he said as she reached across him with her left hand and grabbed the wheel. *"What are you . . . ?"*

Her right hand curled into the shape of a claw and snapped onto his face.

"ELLIE!"

The car swerved.

He regained the wheel and tried to pull her hand off his face. But it was gripping like a vise, pressing higher, going for the eyes.

He fought to get away. Her nails raked his face, ripping out tracks of skin. He felt the sting in his cheek, then the sharpness of her nails entering his eyes.

He slammed his elbow and shoulder into her. But she would not be moved. She clung, spidering over him.

Her left hand yanked the wheel again, hard.

Now they were bumping off the road, tearing through bushes, heading straight for a tall, twisted oak.

"ELLIE, NO!"

The car slammed into the tree and buckled like a child's toy. The hood hissed steam. Challis felt something tearing loose and the door opening next to him, and then he was tumbling out into wet leaves and vines, rolling free of the wreckage.

He wiped blood out of his eyes and staggered to his feet.

Ellie's door was open, too.

She was emerging from the other side, propped up stiffly.

Her eyes were cold and fixed, utterly without emotion.

Her right arm was missing.

He stumbled around the car. The hood was sprung open. He heaved for air, gathering strength.

Ellie found him.

As her one arm snapped out and locked onto his face, he lost his

balance and reeled back into the open jaws of the trunk. He grasped her wrist with both of his hands and wrestled with it but that did no good. Her arm was a bar, her fingers steel, going for his eyes, his nose—

He reached behind him. His hand connected with something long, something hard.

A tire iron.

He swung it down once, twice. There was a crunching sound. That broke the grip.

She rocked back on stiff legs, her mouth spewing white fluid.

She regained her balance.

He had no choice. He swung the iron again. The blow spun her around, her head cocked quizzically at an impossible angle. Then she fell.

The torn joint where her arm had been continued to pulse for a few seconds more as the electronic works slowed and finally ceased spinning.

A feeble jet of silicone pumped into the dirt.

He stood over her a bit longer, trying to comprehend.

But it was late. Very late.

Almost too late.

He lurched back to the car.

The motor was still running, the fan blades hacking away at the radiator. A fog of steam poured from under the hood as he attempted to back out.

It was no good. The car wouldn't move. It was caught on the tree. Or wedged against something in back. He held it in reverse and rocked it back and forth, back and—

At his feet, on the floorboard of the car, Ellie's missing arm was crawling in a circle.

It leaped for his face.

He rolled out. But the fingers were still on him. They wouldn't let go.

He smashed into the tree, again and again, until the arm fell loose.

As he ran off into the night, the fingers of the severed arm continued to dig their painted nails into the earth, burrowing for prey.

Jones saw him coming through the rain and dropped his magazine.

The filthy man jumped down from the passenger side of the diesel truck and nearly bashed his brains out on the silver pumps. The truck

driver gave him one last look, shook his head and geared up Charter Way like a bat out of hell.

The attendant started to lock the door to the station, then hesitated and squinted through the rain.

The man, filthy with mud and soaked to the skin, staggered across the concrete islands, blood washing from his face and mingling with the oil on the pavement. He could not see where he was going. He held his head with one hand and reached out like a blind beggar for help.

The attendant put up the hood of his slicker and opened the door.

"Gotta . . . use . . . phone!" said the filthy man. "Life and death! It's . . ."

"Sure, man," said Jones. "Say, don't I know you?"

The man pushed past him and fell upon the phone.

Jones shut the door and turned down the volume of his portable television set.

"No! Don't turn it off!"

"Sure, sure, man. Whatever you say."

This time the operator came on the line. She gave him the numbers he wanted and he started dialing. First one network, then the other.

As soon as he said "bomb," they listened.

". . . If it goes out, it means death to millions of people! To everyone watching! *Death*, do you under—right, a bomb! I've planted a bomb! Why can't you understand?"

He wept tears of blood.

"No, I can't prove it—you've got to believe me! You've got to!"

He hung up, dialed again.

Behind him, there was a movement in the doorway.

He flattened against a shelf of oil cans in horror as a witch, a pumpkin and a skull-face wandered in to stand behind Jones.

They gave the man a quick glance, giggled and shrugged, and turned their attention to the TV set.

Onscreen, a close-up pumpkin began to flicker.

"No!" screamed the filthy man.

Abruptly the commercial was replaced by a printed card.

PLEASE STAND BY.

"It worked! It worked . . ." He fumbled for support and kept himself standing. "Thank God . . . it worked."

One of the Halloween trick-or-treaters clicked the TV to another channel.

WE ARE EXPERIENCING TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES. PLEASE STAND BY.

The filthy man nodded silently and fell to his knees.

Then the witch flipped to ABC.

The Silver Shamrock commercial.

A jack-o'-lantern began to flicker and strobe in the narrow office.

"The other one, the third network!" He tore at the phone dial with his bloody finger. *"Get it off the air! Get it off now! Get it—!"*

But it was too late.

He dialed his home.

It rang. And rang. And rang.

He screamed on into the useless phone.

"Turn it off! Linda, for the love of God, turn it off *now!"*

He turned to the attendant, the children in costume.

Who watched him blankly, as if he were a madman. They did nothing.

The room began flickering an electric orange, flaming around them like a giant graven pumpkin in the night.

"Turn it off!" he cried. *"Stop it!"*

The phone shook out of control in his hand, as he screamed on and on, waiting for someone to answer.

Bella.

Or Willie.

Anyone.

"STOP IT! STOP IT! STOP . . . !"

Then there was only the sound of the rain outside in the endless blackness of the long night and, presently, the rising tones of a pitiful wailing within and without, spreading across the station, the town, and the land without end.